

Mentoring as mutual formation:

a shared journey of growth and grace

Lutheran Education Australia's Leadership Development Program (LDP) is a two-year program of formal study that prepares teaching staff for leadership within Lutheran education communities. Each participant is paired with an experienced leader who walks alongside them as a mentor throughout their learning journey, meeting regularly to talk and reflect. Mentors and mentees from the LDP shared their experiences with program manager Suzanne Jessen.

BY SUZANNE JESSEN

THE RECIPROCAL NATURE OF MENTORING

Mentoring plays a vital role in shaping leaders, strengthening communities and fostering reflective practice. At its heart, true mentoring is not a one-way imparting of expertise. It is relational, reciprocal and deeply formative. When two people commit to shared learning and intentional conversation, both are shaped in meaningful and lasting ways.

WHEN THE MENTOR BECOMES THE LEARNER

Many mentors describe their experience as unexpectedly enriching, challenging the assumption that mentoring primarily benefits the mentee. Evie Stevens, principal at Good Shepherd Lutheran School in Para Vista, South Australia, believes she has grown more than her mentees. 'The co-learning opportunities and conversations are rich in relationships and the realities of working with and leading people,' she says.

This co-learning goes beyond exchanging ideas. It involves a deepening of self-understanding and relational wisdom. As Evie reflects, 'It has been a privilege to walk alongside an emerging leader and

see their growth, not only in knowledge, but more importantly, their understanding of self.'

PRESENCE, REFLECTION AND SHARED INSIGHT

This sense of mutual formation is echoed across mentoring stories. Mentor Michael Stock, the principal at St James Lutheran College in Hervey Bay, Queensland, describes mentoring as 'mutual formation'. He emphasises that human and leadership growth is 'rarely linear and never solitary'. For Michael, mentoring is less about instruction and more about presence: slowing down, listening deeply and suspending judgement so that clarity and insight can emerge.

In these reflective spaces, both mentor and mentee may find themselves examining assumptions and reconsidering what matters most. Michael says that 'asking reflective questions of others has a way of quietly asking them of ourselves'.

THE RIPPLE EFFECT OF REFLECTIVE DIALOGUE

Reflective dialogue extends well beyond the mentoring relationship itself. Michael recounts attending the installation of a new principal and recognising how her leadership had been 'shaped and supported by many across our system over time'. Mentoring within Lutheran education, he notes, is rarely the work of a single relationship. It is cumulative, relational and deeply communal, shaped through many conversations, faithful witnesses and shared commitments, often long before a role is formally conferred.

Michael connects this insight to Paul's encouragement in 2 Timothy 2:2: 'What you have heard from me through many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others also.' In this way, mentoring becomes not only a professional practice but a spiritual and generational one.

Left: Mentors and mentees in LEA's Leadership Development Program collaborate to explore leadership strengths and support one another's professional growth.



Below left: Kate Hofstee (Faith Lutheran College, Redland Bay Qld) with her mentor, Dr Tsae Wong (formerly of Trinity Lutheran College, Ashmore Qld). Kate reflects, 'My mentor's experience, balanced judgement and thoughtful questioning created a confidential environment where I could work through complex situations, refine my decision-making and gain greater clarity.' Below right: LEA Executive Director Jodie Hoff meets with mentee Kristie Williams, a teacher at Immanuel Primary School in Novar Gardens SA.



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LONG-TERM IMPACT AND SUSTAINED RELATIONSHIPS

This impact is central to mentor Penny McKenzie, principal at Concordia College's Concordia Campus in suburban Adelaide, South Australia. She describes mentoring as 'an incredible privilege' in her professional journey. She speaks of enduring relationships with former mentees that continue well beyond the formal mentoring period – relationships that testify to 'the impact and value of the mentoring process for both the mentee and the mentor', she says.

By creating a safe space for open, reflective dialogue, both mentor and mentee are stretched in their thinking and deepen their practice. Penny also notes that engaging with reading and research through mentoring has kept her own learning current and relevant. Her greatest joy, however, is seeing former mentees step into new leadership roles, growth that continues long after the mentoring relationship formally concludes.

CO-CREATION AND STRENGTHENED LEADERSHIP

For mentor Tyson Kenny, the acting principal at Faith Lutheran College in Plainland, Queensland, mentoring has strengthened his own leadership. 'One of the greatest benefits has been the guided support I have received in my role as mentor, which has helped me to further develop my mentoring and coaching skills,' he says. These skills flow back into his everyday leadership, enabling him to better support middle-level and aspiring leaders in his school community.

Tyson describes mentoring as co-creation, in which 'the leadership influence of both the mentor and mentee is strengthened, enabling each to better lead, grow and serve'. Mentoring, in this sense, is not simply about solving problems or preparing for the next role. It opens space for the deeper questions of purpose, identity, resilience and faith; questions that shape both mentor and mentee.

THE TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCE OF MENTEES

Mentees describe mentoring as equally transformative. Anna-Marie Bothe, principal at St John's Lutheran School in Henty, New South Wales, reflects that her mentor provided 'a confidential safe space' in which she could explore leadership challenges and personal goals. Their shared context enriched their conversations and grew into a lasting relationship. As she shares, 'We formed a friendship that I know will continue throughout our careers and beyond.'

A GENERATIONAL TRADITION OF LEADERSHIP FORMATION

Ultimately, the process of mentoring strengthens individuals, relationships and the wider Lutheran education system. Its impact is personal and communal, immediate and generational. As mentors and mentees commit to listening, learning and forming one another, they participate in a living tradition, entrusting wisdom, experience and encouragement from one leader to the next.

Taken together, these voices paint a picture of mentoring as a relational, reciprocal, grace-shaped practice – one that forms leaders not through hierarchy, but through companionship, reflection and shared growth. And in every relationship, both mentor and mentee walk away changed.

– with thanks to contributing authors Evie Stevens, Michael Stock, Penny McKenzie, Tyson Kenny and Anna-Marie Bothe

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