

Spiritual Direction in the Wider Context of Pastoral Practice

ABSTRACT

The practice of spiritual direction is growing in New Zealand. There are those (including advocates of spiritual direction) who charge that the dominant 'therapeutic' model caters to our individualistic, acquisitive culture, and divorces spiritual direction from congregational life. This paper evaluates the results of a survey of 40 spiritual directors from various denominations in New Zealand. The results show that, although the therapeutic model is the main one used in New Zealand to train directors, the gift or skill of direction has not been thereby institutionalized or professionalized. Rather, the skills gained from training have flowed over to enrich general pastoral ministry.

Introduction

Commentators tell us that we are now living in the post-modern period. A characteristic of this new epoch, defined by one evangelical as being dated from the fall of the Berlin wall,¹ is a resurgence in interest in spirituality in Christian churches. It was the perceived need for just such a resurgence in spirituality that prompted Eugene Peterson to charge the pastors of America with the following:

1 Thomas C. Oden, 'The Death of Modernity and Postmodern Evangelical Spirituality', in David S. Dockery (Ed), *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997) p. 20.

The pastors of America have metamorphosed into a company of shopkeepers, and the shops they keep are churches.... The pastor's responsibility is to keep the community attentive to God. It is this responsibility that is being abandoned in spades. ... Three pastoral acts are so basic, so critical, that they determine the shape of everything else. The acts are praying, reading scripture, and giving spiritual direction.²

Over the last few decades spiritual direction, a discipline that seemed to have been neglected even in its birthplace – the Catholic Church, has been making a comeback. This rediscovered treasure of the Catholic Church has been championed across denominational borders by Catholic writers like Thomas Green and William Barry, Anglican Kenneth Leech, and Presbyterian Eugene Peterson. But from these various writers come a variety of definitions as to what spiritual direction is in essence. For example, Peterson defines it as:

[Spiritual direction] is an act of giving attention to what God is doing in the person who happens to be before me at any given moment.³

A more extensive definition is that given by William Barry and William Connolly, viz.:

[Spiritual direction is the] help given by one Christian to another which enables that person to pay attention to God's personal communication to him or her, to respond to this personally communicating God, to grow in intimacy with this God, and to live out the consequences of the relationship.⁴

These definitions are sufficiently different to give rise to the question: How is spiritual direction given or practiced? One popular approach, that championed by Barry and Connolly and others, is to undertake spiritual direction in a manner similar to counseling. Labeled the 'therapeutic approach' to spiritual direction, the director and directee meet one-on-one for

2 Eugene Peterson, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) pp. 2, 3.

3 Peterson, *Working the Angles* pp. 3, 4.

4 William Barry and William Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction* (New York: Harper, 1982) p. 8.

structured periodic appointments. Further, other contact between director and directee is somewhat discouraged to avoid the confusion that can occur with dual relationships.⁵ This is the approach that has been popularised within New Zealand by Spiritual Growth Ministries (SGM), an interdenominational organisation that has trained by far the bulk of spiritual directors working here. But it is this very approach to spiritual direction that has caused Kenneth Leech, an early advocate of spiritual direction when it was largely still unknown, to charge that spiritual direction, with directors accumulating diplomas and charging fees, has lost its bearings and sold out to professionalism.⁶ Both Leech and Peterson argue for spiritual direction to be practiced as part of the ordinary ministry of the church. In fact Peterson has written a book entitled *The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction*. In it he talks about pastors experiencing a rediscovery of the pastoral work of curing souls,⁷ the work of spiritual direction.

In the light of the above, one may ask whether the charges of Peterson and Leech are valid. Is spiritual direction as practiced in New Zealand a professionalised activity isolated from the normal ebb and flow of pastoral life? This essay explores this issue. Its focus is the practice of spiritual direction in the wider context of general pastoral ministry.

5 Richard M. Gula, in *Ethics in Pastoral Ministry* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996) p. 80, defines dual relationships as occurring 'when we interact with another person in more one capacity.' Further, he notes that 'dual relationships become problems in pastoral ministry when roles get confused and boundaries are not respected' (p. 81).

6 Kenneth Leech, 'Is Spiritual Direction Losing its Bearings?', in *The Tablet*, (May 22, 1993).

7 Eugene Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 56.

The Survey

To investigate the practice of spiritual direction in the wider context of general pastoral ministry in New Zealand, a survey was prepared. The aim of the survey was to investigate the following issues:

- An indication of the age demographics of directors working in New Zealand.
- When and with whom the director trained.
- The wider circumstances of ministry of the director.
- To whom is spiritual direction given?
- From whence are directees sourced?
- How has training and working as a spiritual director enhanced general ministry skills?
- Difficulties or tensions arising from the practice of spiritual direction.

Fifty-four directors were sent the survey. Forty responses were received. These 40 do not represent a random sample however. First, the author targeted Baptists (either trained or training as directors) who are or have been in general pastoral ministry. Directors of other denominations in the SGM training group of 1998/1999⁸ who were/are in general pastoral ministry were also approached. The list was rounded out with names (of people who appeared to be in wider pastoral ministry) taken from the list of the 'Association of Christian Spiritual Directors' of New Zealand. The table on the next page compares the denominational proportions of the respondents with the proportions determined from the denominational indicators of all directors in the Association of Christian Spiritual Directors list (as at 26 October 1998). It can be seen that the survey reported here under-represents Catholic directors in particular, and over-represents Anglican and Baptist directors.

⁸ The author, a Baptist pastor, trained as a spiritual director under the auspices of SGM with this group.

<i>Denomination</i>	<i>ACSD List</i>	<i>Respondents</i>
Catholic	44%	17.5%
Anglican	21.5%	35%
Presbyterian	16%	15%
Baptist	9%	25%
Salvation Army	6.5%	2.5%
Other	2.8%	5%

Table 1: Comparison of respondents to survey with directors practicing spiritual direction in New Zealand.

Age and Gender of the Respondents

Table 2 lists the age and denominational characteristics of the respondents. Given the relatively small sample size, only a few generalisations may be made from the data presented in Table 2. One is that there seem to be fewer female directors in the over 60 age bracket. This could be due to the fact that a number of the men in this age range are retired clergy who have trained as spiritual directors in their latter years. Another feature is that Catholic and Anglicans are a little over-represented (when compared to the overall proportions of the respondents) in the older age bracket. Baptists on the other hand, are over-represented in the middle-age bracket. This could be due to the fact that the current Executive Secretary of the Baptist Union of New Zealand has encouraged pastors to train as spiritual directors; this tends to be a younger group because of attrition amongst Baptist pastors.

<i>Age Range</i>	<i>Denomination</i>	<i>Number</i>
Under 35	Anglican	1 female
35-60	Catholic	4 female
	Anglican	4 male, 4 female
	Baptist	4 male, 4 female
	Presbyterian	3 male, 1 female
	Other	1 male, 1 female
Over 60	Catholic	1 male, 2 female
	Anglican	4 male, 1 female
	Baptist	2 male
	Presbyterian	2 male
	Other	1 female

Table 2: Age, gender, and denominational composition of respondents to survey.

Spiritual Director Training

The survey first asked if the respondents have been through a training programme in the area of spiritual direction. Not surprisingly – in view of the process used to select potential respondents (see above) – all replies indicated that they had received training or are currently in a training programme. This is not quite the innocent question it may appear to be. Kenneth Leech insists that the role of training should be extremely limited, with the ministry of spiritual direction arising out of a life of prayer and growth in holiness.⁹ Tilden Edwards makes a

9 Leech, 'Is Spiritual Direction Losing Its Bearings'.

similar comment, but allows: '...it is a gift, and art, like any gift or art, that can be given perspective, depth, and support in a special program.'¹⁰ SGM evaluates people who want to train for the ministry of spiritual direction under its auspices, seeking to encourage those who have the gift or exercise the art already. Clearly those who approach SGM feel the need to extend that with depth and perspective.

The data become highly interesting, though, when a correlation is made between the time of training and the place where training as a spiritual director took place. Only three of the respondents had trained in the '70s. Two of these are Catholics who both trained in Rome, the other a Presbyterian (the founder of SGM!) who trained in the US.

In the '80s there was a small increase in the number of those who trained as spiritual directors. Of the two Catholic respondents who trained in this decade, one trained in Rome and the other in the US. Two of the three Anglican respondents were also trained in the US; the other simply listed the training provider as the Anglican Church. The other three respondents who trained in this decade are a Baptist who trained in Wales, and two Presbyterians one of whom trained through SGM, the other through a variety of courses.

The picture changes radically for the 90s, however. Twenty-nine respondents to the survey trained (or were training) in the '90s. Two of the three Catholics from this group trained overseas and through SGM respectively, while the other trained both with SGM and overseas. Nine of the eleven Anglicans from this group trained (or are training) through SGM. Two of the three Presbyterians trained with SGM, the other overseas. All the other respondents have trained or are training through the auspices of SGM.

The picture painted above is of a growing movement that was initially resourced offshore. The Catholic and Presbyterian

10 Tilden Edwards, *Spiritual Friend: Reclaiming the Gift of Spiritual Direction* (Paulist Press: New York, 1980), p. 195.

Churches have then shared the expertise gained offshore with the wider church community in New Zealand, especially through SGM. As momentum has gained, spiritual direction as a movement has clearly impacted the Catholic, Presbyterian, Anglican, and Baptist Churches. To this point it seems to have missed the Methodist and Pentecostal Churches. SGM is obviously at the forefront of the provision of trained spiritual directors for New Zealand at the moment. The recent emergence of another trainer of spiritual directors based in Christchurch indicates that the momentum behind spiritual direction is strengthening, and there is plenty of scope for growth.

The question was then asked: How have you changed spiritually/theologically through training as a spiritual director? The most significant change described by the respondents was that they have become more contemplative. Training as a spiritual director has, above all, changed people's relationship with God. Close behind came the observation that training as a spiritual director has led to a broader, more inclusive, theological outlook. (Interestingly, several stated specifically that they hadn't changed theologically, although they are now more accepting of others.) Also ranked as important were the observations from some respondents that they had come to a greater knowledge of self, and a greater awareness of the resources for spiritual growth available in other spiritual traditions. In summary, it could be stated that training as a spiritual director leads to an enhanced knowledge of God, of oneself, and of the wider Christian church.

The final question in this section was: What do you do differently in your ministry since training as a spiritual director? The responses to this question fell into three broad areas. First, for many of the respondents, training as a spiritual director has enabled a clearer focus on the rest of their ministry tasks. A greater emphasis on God and spirituality permeates their preaching and pastoral care. For a few, the whole area of spiritual direction has clarified why they are actually in pastoral ministry. As Eugene Peterson comments: 'More and more pastors are embracing this way of pastoral work and are finding

themselves authenticated by it.¹¹ Second, most of the respondents indicated that they have found a far greater freedom to let God work in the lives of directees (and indeed others). Within this broad compass were listed items like an enhanced ability to listen while talking less, a freedom to not have to solve problems but leave room for God to move, and a greater emphasis on the unique nature of each person's journey in God which directors accompany them on. Finally, for a few, training as a spiritual director has resulted in a change of personal behaviour, for example in the practice of self-care.

Circumstances of Ministry

Under this heading, the respondents were asked to describe the ministry areas they have been or are involved with while giving spiritual direction. Some strong denominational differences showed up in the responses. All the Catholic respondents are involved with giving spiritual direction as their main ministry activity or in conjunction with the provision of supervision, retreat direction etc. Of the six Presbyterian respondents, four are retired from pastoral ministry and give spiritual direction as their current ministry focus or in conjunction with counseling or lecturing.

Over half of the Anglican respondents have previously been in pastoral ministry and now undertake spiritual direction along with other activities such as supervision or lecturing, or are now retired. The majority of the others are either sole charge ministers or are part of a pastoral team. The impression gained is that, for the Anglican Church, the practice of spiritual direction has strong connections with general pastoral ministry. The link is even stronger for the Baptist respondents, as is to be expected from the survey methodology. Eight of the ten are either in pastoral ministry (as senior pastors of a team, sole charge pastors, or pastoral team members) or have been in pastoral

11 Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor*, p. 56.

ministry. The other two are involved in theological education and workplace chaplaincy respectively.

Next the survey considered the question: To whom do the respondents give spiritual direction? The Catholics respondents all see their directees as clients, and they come from all denominations. (In fact, many of the respondents are involved in cross-denominational spiritual directing. Often the directee is a clergy person of another denomination.) Only one said that she wouldn't direct friends, but this may be assumed by the others and therefore not stated. Amongst the Anglican respondents, around half indicate that they either don't direct parishioners or fellow worshippers, or are uncomfortable in doing so. The others seem to be comfortable in directing parishioners or fellow worshippers. The same pattern seems to fit the Presbyterian respondents. Interestingly, two of these commented that there seemed to be little demand from within their own churches.

Of the Baptist respondents, only one ruled out directing persons encountered in the primary ministry area. The others all seemed comfortable with directing parishioners or fellow worshippers, as well as others. It could be that the issue of dual relationships is not perceived to be such a problem, because the congregational government of Baptist Churches already involves most in such relationships already.

The fact that so many of the directors do in fact give direction to people with whom they have dual relationships means that this is not seen as an insurmountable problem. And nor should it be, insists Richard Gula, noting that rigid boundaries for all pastoral ministers would be as crippling of ministry as would having no defined boundaries. He states: 'Although dual relationships are not automatically wrong in the pastoral ministry, they do need to be carefully evaluated, and pastoral ministers have the professional duty to make this evaluation.'¹² Tilden Edwards suggests that the choice may not be the

12 Gula p. 81.

director's, but the directee who evaluates whether their pastor may be right as a director for them.¹³ It appears that many of the spiritual directors working in New Zealand are confident enough of their professionalism to give direction to parishioners or fellow worshippers.¹⁴

But from whence do the directors get their directees? The Catholic respondents largely ignored the questions here. I assume a low-level advertising (such as the yearly programme put out by Rosary House in Christchurch) and an expectation that spiritual direction belongs in the Catholic Church may account for many of their clients. But for a large number of the respondents, it seems that word just gets around! As one Anglican commented: 'When the teacher is ready, the pupils will come.' Sr Donald Corcoran puts it the other way around: 'The spiritual fathers and mothers have told us that when a disciple is ready a master or mistress appears.'¹⁵

Spiritual direction training clearly heightens sensitivity to spiritual issues. And so many other people are interested in spiritual direction by directors who recognise in these ones an openness to journeying in God. Or is it that those who are open to journeying in God recognise those who can accompany them? The spiritually hungry are found on retreats, in counseling (for other issues), in the workplace by chaplains who also direct, and in other chance encounters. Another source from which directors obtain directees is referrals from other directors or informal contacts. Fascinatingly, amongst the Baptist respondents there was a disproportionate emphasis on marketing. Advertising through brochures or personal deputation was mentioned. (Could this be a reflection of an

13 Edwards p. 119.

14 None of the respondents went as far in this direction as one writer on spiritual direction who seems to infer that one's spouse could also be their spiritual director! See Suzanne Zuercher, *Enneagram Companions: Growing in Relationships and Spiritual Direction* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 1993) p. 14.

15 Quoted in Zuercher p. 14

evangelical church culture that certainly sees its calling in marketing the gospel? One Baptist director told the writer that it is in fact a recognition of the stingy nature of some evangelical Christians who will take as much as they can get for as little cost as possible, and despise the gift in the process!).

Enhancement of Ministry Skills

Respondents were asked about any enhancement of their general ministry that has occurred as a result of training as a spiritual director.

A number of responses simply indicated a general enhancement of ministry skills, without being specific. For those who were more specific, however, by far the most common response was that their listening skills have improved. Could it be that this vital aspect of general (i.e. not just pastoral) ministry is relatively neglected in initial training programmes? While Edwards comments that seminaries across the American continent neglect to train students in skills that are useful to spiritual direction,¹⁶ theological education providers in New Zealand have been working in recent years to address such issues. Improved listening then correlated with improvements in areas like discernment, the use of reflective questioning, helping directees go deeper, being better able to companion others, and letting God do the work. All these are things that Barry and Connolly describe as qualities or capabilities of directors that are indispensable to the work of direction.¹⁷

As is maybe to be expected, a number of respondents mentioned that training as a spiritual director has impacted their preaching, and their pastoral care and visiting. A clearer sense of the numinous has been evident in these activities. Further, some with counseling ministries mentioned a similar thing; their counseling (even with secular people) has become more

¹⁶ Edwards p. 195.

¹⁷ Barry and Connolly p. 46.

spiritually aware. A few wrote of an enhanced confidence and greater professionalism in their work.

It was clear from many of the responses that training as a spiritual director has enabled people to be creative in other ministry areas, and to draw on a wide range of spiritual resources from varied places. Contemplative services and groups have been started. Alternative prayer techniques (e.g. *Lectio Divina*) have been suggested to directees and others. Dreamwork and psychological resources (e.g. Myers Briggs Type Indicator) have been employed. Spiritual direction training has resulted in a cross-fertilisation of spiritual riches from the different denominations, but especially from the Catholic Church to Protestant churches.

The above goes some way to addressing the concerns raised by Leech and Peterson. The impression gained is that the skills learned for and applied to one-on-one spiritual direction sessions flow over into general pastoral work. Thus directors are also aware of what God is doing in the person who happens to be before them at any given moment, and 'direction' in this more low key way assumes the lowly and limited function which Leech asserts it must exhibit.¹⁸

And has spiritual growth been seen in the lives of directees? Overwhelmingly, the respondents answered in the positive. Perhaps this is as expected. However, a few indicated that this is not a given. These respondents mentioned that they have directed people who have been resistant to spiritual growth, and such growth has not been evident. Direction in such circumstances is not, though, to be discarded; it is simply more difficult.¹⁹

18 Leech, *Is Spiritual Direction Losing its Bearings*.

19 It should be noted that the survey did not address the issue of whether direction given in the therapeutic form (beneficial though it undoubtedly appears from the respondents' comments) fosters individualism and the privatisation of religion, another concern of Leech. This would be a fascinating topic for study in its own right.

Difficulties or Tensions

The final part of the survey investigated whether having trained and then practicing as a spiritual director has introduced additional difficulties or tensions into other ministry situations. An analysis of the data shows clearly that the majority of respondents have not found difficulties or tensions to have been introduced into their other ministry areas consequent on having trained as a spiritual director. Some stated that such difficulties that do exist were there before they trained as spiritual directors. Their training and subsequent work as directors has not exacerbated these problems.

For a minority of directors, their training and subsequent practice as spiritual directors has created difficulties or increased ministry tensions. Interestingly, pretty well all of these directors are Anglicans and Baptists. (The one Pentecostal respondent also figured here; in his case a broadened theological outlook has created multiple difficulties in his pentecostal context.)

Just over half of the respondents wrote that practicing spiritual direction has heightened issues of boundaries. For a few the boundary in question is that between counseling and spiritual direction. For most the issue at stake is that of dual roles. But it seems that this is not seen as insurmountable, as some of these respondents do function with dual roles. Rather, it seems that these directors are simply more aware of the need for appropriate boundaries in dual role situations. For the others, boundary issues have obviously been worked out satisfactorily prior to training as spiritual directors.

Twenty percent of the respondents noted difficulties over leadership issues. For the majority of these, the difficulties or tensions are with leaders in their own worshipping community, these leaders being people who don't understand spiritual direction and so are not supportive of it. Largely the same group (again, 20% of the respondents) noted increased tension with colleagues. Again, the main reason is a lack of appreciation for what spiritual direction is. For some, though, their colleagues have aims that are contrary to those of spiritual direction and

thus seem to see directors as not loyal to their cause. For about 10% of the respondents, these tensions create difficulties in the delivery of their wider ministry. This conflict is perhaps to be expected. Kenneth Leech states: '[spiritual direction] runs counter to the prevailing models and emphases in ministry and in pastoral theology, and it can therefore be expected to meet with some resistance from those responsible for ministerial programmes, as well as those at the receiving end of ministerial practice.'²⁰ Picking up this latter point, a couple of respondents noted that the difficulty was with their own leadership role, and expectations arising from directees. Thus, even with those who seek out spiritual direction, its actual practice may spark resistance.

For 15% of the respondents, having trained and subsequently working as a spiritual director has created both ideological and theological difficulties and tensions. In terms of the ideological tensions, the actual issues mentioned are as numerous as respondents. In broad terms they can be seen as clashes with the wider denominational culture of the particular respondent. The same generalisation is roughly true with respect to theological tensions, although in one case the tension is with some of the theology common in spiritual direction circles.

A subjective assessment of the data in this area of difficulties and tensions yields some interesting observations. First, having trained and then working as spiritual directors seems to have been without enhanced tension for the Catholic and Presbyterian respondents. This is also true for many of the Anglicans. However, for some of the Anglican respondents, difficulties – for various reasons – have arisen primarily with colleagues or those in the immediate ministry context. The issue for the Baptist respondents is different. For them the difficulties or tensions arise out of the wider denominational ethos. The impression is given of directors who feel out of step with the

20 Kenneth Leech, *Spirituality and Pastoral Care* (London: Sheldon Press, 1986), p. 75.

Baptist emphases on church growth, visionary leadership, and fix-it activism. It may be that the Baptist spiritual directors are experiencing the struggle of linking contemplation with action, one of the essential aims of spiritual guidance according to Leech.²¹ Perhaps working as a spiritual director will increase difficulties in the wider context of ministry the more towards the conservative end of the church spectrum the director is located.

That the clear majority of directors seemed to find no difficulties or tensions arising from their training and working as spiritual directors is in a way disturbing. Is this rediscovered gift so easily domesticated? Leech comments:

...it is necessary to allow the turmoil and ferment of the contemporary struggles to shake the spiritual patterns in which we are frequently imprisoned or protected. Authentic spiritual direction must include preparation for threats to spiritual security, for inner disturbances of spirit, for confrontations with new knowledge and new visions.²²

Conclusions

An analysis of the responses to the survey of the practice of spiritual direction in the wider context of pastoral practice in New Zealand shows that it (the practice of spiritual direction) is being restored as a valuable ministry to wider church. The impression gained is that the recent release of this gift has been pioneered by Catholics and Presbyterians who have trained overseas. From this base, and largely through the training programme of Spiritual Growth Ministries, the spread of the gift has widened to embrace most of the churches in New Zealand even if the influence is yet small.

The fact that SGM has taught the 'therapeutic approach' to spiritual direction has not resulted in the gift being institutionalised or professionalised. Indeed, the skills obtained

21 Kenneth Leech, *Soul Friend: An Invitation to Spiritual Direction* (San Francisco: Harper, 1980) p. 32.

22 Leech, *Soul Friend*, p. 32.

through training and exercising spiritual direction in structured one-to-one sessions constructively flow over into general pastoral ministry. Thus, whether or not directors give formal direction to parishioners or fellow worshippers, it appears that they are much more aware of what God is doing in themselves and in the persons they are in contact with. It could even be inferred that the disciplines gained in the formal giving of spiritual direction result in direction being given (perhaps unconsciously) in the less formal sense encouraged by Eugene Peterson and Kenneth Leech. Thus, spiritual direction as practiced in New Zealand is not a professionalised activity isolated from the normal ebb and flow of pastoral life. Rather, those trained in the art of spiritual direction are reviving the gift where it had previously been lost, that is in the heart of normal pastoral life.

Jeff Whittaker