

# **DIRECTED LIVES**

**by**

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## **Introduction.**

Nearly two years ago, I began the Spiritual Directors Training Programme. As I began to learn and to practise this ministry, I became aware that in direction I was prepared to offer the person sitting in front of me a quality of listening, support and empathy that, to my shame, I did not always offer to my family or to my friends. This unpleasant realisation led me to consider the authenticity of the life I had chosen. I felt that I needed to become more genuine; that I needed to demonstrate the beliefs I espoused. I needed to be honest – to live out my faith.

It crossed my mind, too, that this might be an issue for directees. I began to wonder about the effects of receiving direction on a person's life. Are directees challenged in the same way that I was? Does God call people to live out in a wider way, beyond the direction session, their relationship with him? As directors we hope that those who come to us will grow in their relationship with God, and that this will have wider ramifications in their lives. I now asked whether this really happened or if it was just some fond hope.

Feeding in to these questions, were comments made by a couple of well-known authors. One of the foundational texts to students of spiritual direction was written by Kenneth Leech and published in 1977. <sup>1</sup>Recently he revised this book, and in it sounds a number of cautions. The profession of spiritual direction has advanced in ways that he had not anticipated when he first wrote. It assumes, he believes, a

*“view of spirituality which is not wholesome and only tenuously Christian, and which reflects the individualism and privatization of religion in the West.”*<sup>2</sup>

He calls this a “false inwardness”. The ministry of spiritual direction needs to be rooted in the Christian community,

*“a framework of sacrament, discipleship and social action. It takes place within a context of theological reflection and social struggle.”*<sup>3</sup>

Richard Foster's Streams of Living Water examines the different strands which comprise Christianity today, discussing the strengths and weaknesses of each tradition. Contemplation, the fostering of which is a basic task of the spiritual director, he argues has potential perils: anti-intellectualism; a tendency towards individualism rather than the community of faith; the tendency to avoid the pressing social issues of the day.<sup>4</sup>

A number of questions began to form to do with what happens for people who receive direction. Do they, as Leech would suggest, become inward-looking? Is there a tendency for them to become individualistic, to pursue God outside the community of faith? Are they people who become less involved in the lives of others, and particularly less involved in social issues?

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Leech, Soul Friend.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, pp xvii-xviii

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*, p xviii.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Foster, Springs of Living Water, pp53-56.

## **The Interviews**

In order to respond to these criticisms, I decided to interview people who had been receiving spiritual direction, and to ask them questions to do with attending it and the outcomes of receiving direction in their lives. (The full questionnaire is in the Appendix). What follows is my edited summary of those interviews.

One difficulty I had in this research was obtaining candidates to interview who had ceased receiving direction. I obtained interview subjects by writing to local spiritual directors, and so all the people were currently receiving direction. It would have been interesting to interview more people who had stopped (there is only one) to explore the reasons why they had not continued.

I interviewed thirteen people. Ten of those people were interviewed in person and the interview was recorded on tape. Two were interviewed over the telephone; one responded to questions by email.

### **1. Basic Information**

Of those interviewed, 12 were female and 1 was male – probably not a representative sample. (Although I presume that more women attend direction than men, I do not believe the imbalance is as great as my numbers would suggest). In age, they ranged from the mid 30s to the mid 60s. Over half of the interviewees (7) were in the 50 – 59 years age bracket.

As far as occupation was concerned, I interviewed 3 teachers, 4 spiritual directors, 1 lay minister, 1 dentist, 1 social worker, 1 part time shop assistant, and 4 mothers. Several were involved in more than one job. The mothers, for example, classified themselves as full-time mothers, but 3 of them worked in another job, part time. A couple of others also worked at more than one occupation.

### **2. Spiritual Direction**

Those interviewed had received direction for various periods of time. I interviewed a large range – one who attended direction for less than a year, to others who had been attending for nearly 20 years. On average, though, those I interviewed had been in direction for 8 years.

The reasons that led people to enter direction were similarly varied. A couple had come across direction through retreats; four had heard about direction through friends or reading or, in one case, an information evening, and become interested; two had entered direction as part of exploring themselves. For the remainder, there were more individual reasons such as a friend beginning training as a director and needing a directee, and as part of the requirement to do one's job.

The experience of receiving direction was overwhelmingly positive – 12 of the 13 found it so. Even so, two added that this was not to say that there were some difficult times, and problems to work through. A couple of people had cautions to add. One reported an initial experience with an untrained director that had not been very helpful, although subsequent direction had been. Another had begun direction with a friend and felt that the friendship had changed subtly under the influence of the new relationship, in a way she found to be detrimental to the friendship. This person found spiritual direction not to

be helpful, but said that “It drove me to the counsellor and I still reap the benefits of my time with her.”

When asked what had made the experience positive, interviewees reiterated several points. They noted that the atmosphere of trust and acceptance offered by directors was crucial. Being in a safe, non-judgmental and affirming place enabled directees to be open to their directors, and to accept challenge from them. A few took this further and said that receiving spiritual direction maintained an accountability in their prayer life and relationship with God. It was beneficial to be accompanied by someone with a grasp of, yet outside, one’s own spiritual journey. Others noted the importance of personal growth and being encouraged to be truly themselves.

Most interviewees found spiritual direction to be most valuable over a sustained period. One of the 12 who have continued with direction said that she had begun direction during a period of crisis, and continued in it for a number of years. Now she uses direction “as needed”. For the majority, direction “is indispensable in crisis times” when the need for a safe neutral place is most apparent, but it is more importantly a sustained process which leads to ongoing growth, self-discipline and accountability. It is valuable to reflect on one’s faith journey and to deepen its meaning.

During the period of receiving direction, a number of changes were noted. The first of these relates to the concept of God. As one person said: “My concept of God has been blown! (I now) understand an unconditionally loving God”. Others noted personal changes – in the way they feel about themselves. “I have grown spiritually. I have definitely become more contemplative, and more accepting of myself and other people.” One interviewee commented that spiritual direction had accompanied huge endings and transitions in her life including mid-life issues, the death of parents and friends and a move from more external phase towards a focus on her interior life.

### **3. Relationship with God**

Most respondents noted changes in their theology. God was perceived as more loving and less vindictive or judgmental. Many said that God was a lot “bigger” and that they could relate to him in greater freedom and openness than before. God can now be found in unexpected places – in a walk along the beach, in silence, in the everyday. For a couple of those interviewed, there was no change in basic theology, but they identified large growth in similar ways to the previous group. As one said: “I have learned to dance with God.”

### **4. Church affiliation**

Those interviewed crossed a band of different church affiliations. The majority, 6, attend Anglican churches. Of those, several have crossed a number of denominational boundaries before settling on their current church. These include Baptist and Presbyterian churches. One such interviewee stated that their denomination was “loose Anglican”. Another noted that the God she was discovering in spiritual direction could not be contained in the church she attended. For one year she belonged to no church, but has been a regular worshipper at an Anglican church for the past 3 years.

Two are affiliated with the Roman Catholic church, and two with the Presbyterian.

The remainder, 3, are church leavers. One had belonged to a Pentecostal church. She said that she found she could no longer continue in this church. “It wasn’t about the church – it was about changes in me. So I wrote them a letter explaining that I was following a new path in God.” For her, attending spiritual direction helped to make sense of the changes that were happening in her and to believe that this might be a move in to a new relationship with God. She now attends another church, not very regularly. For one of the other church leavers, beginning direction and leaving her church happened to coincide. For the other, a sequence of unfortunate events within the church sparked her departure. These two church leavers are members of a Christian book club, which functions as a support. It could be said that this is doing church, just that it is not as part of a recognised denomination.

Attending direction is, as could be imagined, very important for those who do not regularly worship in church. It is however, equally important to some of those who are members of churches. One said that direction is “crucial. Without it, I would have been disillusioned and angry because the church would not allow me to express who I was. Spiritual direction allowed me to do that. Eventually without it, I might even have left the church.” Others echoed this sentiment saying that direction allows them to build and to explore their faith more intimately, in a way which is impossible within a church service.

Six interviewees would classify spiritual direction as very important. Four more consider receiving direction as important, with comments to do with accountability and that it is an aid to their faith growth. Two others said that spiritual direction was fairly important or not that important.

## **5. Relationship with Others**

For all who have received direction, there have been changes in relationships with others. It seemed as though they had become willing to offer some of what they had received through direction to others. Comments like this one: “I am more accepting of others and less inclined to impose pat answers on them” from a person who has only recently begun direction. Another person, having received direction for only a short time, said “I run a toddlers’ music group, and I have developed a deeper love and compassion for the mothers who come.”

Two interviewees commented that spiritual direction had helped them to work through difficulties in relationships – the death of a spouse as well as other grief transitions.

The longer people have received direction, the greater the changes in their relationships. Two noted that it was through the experience of receiving direction that they too were drawn to train as spiritual directors. “Being aware of my own spiritual journey makes me more aware of other’s journey.”

Another woman, who has been in direction for over 10 years, says “As I journey there is a continual exploring and challenge in my attitudes to other people.” She is currently being challenged by Jesus’ attitudes to the unlovely in our society; those who live on the streets and to prostitutes. Another says that she aims to offer to others, through every daily exchange, what God offers to her.

In the main, these people were not involved in specific social or outreach programmes. A number, in fact, commented on the freedom they had experienced in no longer actually working or feeling they ought to be working for their local church. As noted above in question 1, two are employed in full-time church ministry and four are spiritual directors. On the other hand, these were not isolated individuals.

#### **6. Relationship with self**

All of the interviewees believed, in varying degrees, that spiritual direction had affected the way in which they know themselves and their roles in the world. They talked of knowing and accepting themselves more, and understanding their areas of giftedness. A couple noted having a greater sense of purpose, and one talked of discovering “this is what I was made to do in the world.” This has been, as one person said “life-changing.” difference.

#### **7. Enneagram/Myers Briggs**

This was a fairly superficial look at the relationship between those who attend spiritual direction and the groups (Enneagram or Myers Briggs type) to which they belong. It is insufficient to use to draw major conclusions. It was interesting to note the wide spread of Enneagram groupings, and the preponderance of 4. As far as Myers Briggs was concerned, all those who knew their type were in the Feeling preference and, of the Extroverted group, all were ESFJ. Given the small numbers canvassed it is hard to say whether this is any more than coincidence. More detailed studies are available.<sup>5</sup>

#### **8. Pitfalls**

A wide range of potential pitfalls was noted, and many of the same points were raised by multiple interviewees.

- i. There needs to be a personality fit between director and directee. If they are unable to relate well to one another, this would impair the working relationship. (6)
- ii. The director must not lead or influence the directee, or abuse the authority that she or he has.(6)
- iii. If the directee cannot trust the director and be open with him or her, there would be little point in attending direction. (5)
- iv. It would not be helpful for a directee to develop a dependency on the director, or develop an unhealthy relationship in any other way. (4)
- v. The boundary with counselling needs to be clear and observed by directors. (3)

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<sup>5</sup> Margaret T Dwyer Wake Up The Sun. This is one book on the connection between Myers Briggs Personality Types and Spiritual Growth. Other studies of this topic and in relation to the Enneagram are available.

Individuals made other isolated but nonetheless important comments – that direction needs to be totally rooted in God and in Scripture; that directors need to make it clear that they will not do the work for those who come to them; and that direction would not be helpful for those who do not pray nor may it help the highly extroverted.

It was interesting to note that none of those interviewed raised any of the issues or concerns that Leech and Foster have mentioned.

## **9. Overall**

When those who were interviewed were asked to summarise in a sentence or two the overall outcome of direction in their lives, they said things like: “Huge personal and spiritual growth”; and “It has changed my life.” A number commented on the contentment and peace that they had found. They all spoke with a warmth and appreciation of the role spiritual direction plays for them.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, let us place the stories of these directees alongside the questions that were posed at the outset. To reiterate, those questions were whether people in direction become inward-looking, individualistic in their faith, and divorced from the lives of others and social issues.

It is probably true to say that those who attend spiritual direction become more aware of themselves as individuals before God. For all those who were interviewed one of the greatest benefits from receiving direction lay in getting to know themselves better. This is not necessarily a bad thing. It is after all an element from deep within the Christian spiritual tradition. Augustine said “May I know myself that I may know you.”

It is through individual Christians after all that the kingdom of God on earth is advanced. Even such an evangelistic writer as Charles Colson, emphasises the importance of the development of the individual in order to have a positive influence on the society in which we live.<sup>6</sup>

The difficulty that Leech raises of “false inwardness” suggests an inappropriate focus on the interior life. This may refer to situations where individuals become self-absorbed and self-interested in unhealthy ways. Being inward-looking then is a matter of degree. It is, I would submit, helpful not only to the individual concerned, but also to others, that Christians understand and accept themselves. As far as those interviewed were concerned, a number commented that in knowing themselves better, they could offer the same kind of acceptance to others. For them, there were encouraging links between looking inwards and relating to the wider world. In one case, an interviewee commented that she was in a stage of taking a break from activity as she had experienced burnout.

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<sup>6</sup> Charles Colson & Nancy Pearcey, How Now Shall We Live, p308.

There may be seasons where a focus on the self is entirely appropriate. For spiritual directors, perhaps, there is a need to be aware, if they are not already, of the danger of looking only inwards too far and for too long. Indications that the emphasis has overbalanced may perhaps be seen where the directee is insulated from the lives of other people.

The second question is : is there a tendency for directees to pursue an individualistic faith outside a church community? In this study, most of those interviewed remained committed to parish churches. Many were involved not only in corporate worship, but in other activities as well. A number had deepened their commitment as a result of attending direction, and in ways that involved the good of others. One had followed the call to full-time ministry; others had undertaken training in spiritual direction and were involved in directing or counselling other individuals.

A few had left churches. They left for a number of reasons. For two, attending spiritual direction provided support as they faced confusion and questions. The questions and dissatisfaction with church began before spiritual direction was commenced. For the third, a personal confrontation with church hierarchy, after she had been attending direction for some months, precipitated departure.

The church leavers interviewed were similar to those described in other studies of church leavers.<sup>7</sup> They were actively involved in their churches of origin and committed to their faith. They were people who grew to a stage of questioning in their faith, and questioning in a way in which the churches they attended found difficult to accept. They appeared to be people at stage of faith transition; people who no longer nicely fitted in to the mould which their denomination demanded.

The church leavers I spoke to were not inward-looking, isolated individuals. They were not people who were disengaged from their communities. All of these church leavers were actively involved with others, whether it was in their families, pre-school music classes; teaching or a Christian book group. One had begun to attend another church although not on a regular basis. The others did not rule out the possibility of being involved in churches in the future. In the meantime, though, they are in places where it is safe to ask questions, to explore and to continue growing in faith. For them, spiritual direction is an extremely important element in their faith journey.

In addition to the 3 church leavers, another 3 of those surveyed had moved churches, including spending a period of time outside church before settling on their current church base. A couple noted that the return to church gave them a sense of community and that they appreciate worship and communion, but that the church environment is insufficient to meet them on the level of their individual journey with God. One went so far as to say that attendance at church did not “feed me one scrap.” This reflects not only the desire to pursue an individual journey with God, but also the depth to which they wish to journey. It is a reflection on the seriousness with which they take their faith.

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<sup>7</sup> Alan Jamieson, [A Churchless Faith](#)

The unspoken assumption behind the comments made by Leech and Foster is that the community of faith is an essential part of one's growth and life as a Christian.

*"The Christian church has always placed an enormous priority on the communal nature of the faith."*<sup>8</sup>

There may, however, be times when it is necessary for individuals to step outside the established church for a period. This does not mean that they have suffered a loss of faith – faith can still continue to grow outside the church. It may be that there are questions they need to ask, and structures they have to challenge, and these things must happen from outside the church. As one interviewee put it, "God is bigger than the church."

Having left, community may be provided in different ways. "Doing church" need not only happen within the known church. The book group mentioned here provides one example of another way of being church, a community of faith for one another. Spiritual direction as suggested earlier may be a particularly important tool for the churchless individual.

Thirdly, do they become less involved in the lives of others and particularly less involved in social issues? Leech and Foster both raise the importance of social action, and involvement in social issues. It is unclear exactly what they might mean by this, or even if they would describe the same type of activity. I would presume, though, that they mean involvement in activities such as Foodbanks or Habitat for Humanity; or political action to campaign for services on behalf of the underprivileged. If this is the type of social action they mean, few of the group interviewed would classify as being involved. One woman works on behalf of a foundation providing homes for children at risk. Two others commented that they were feeling drawn towards work in areas of social justice, but that those areas had not become clear to them at the time of the interview.

If they were to take a wider definition of social action as being any activity on behalf of others, then almost all of those interviewed would classify as taking part. Two people commented that they were purposefully taking a break from involvement in outreach type activities. One of these had suffered from burnout, and the other was in the process of reassessing. The others ministered in varying ways – to families, to children at kindergarten, to people in direction.

If there is any doubt that spiritual direction and social action are compatible, however, one need look no further than the Church of the Saviour in Washington to see that this is not so.<sup>9</sup> There this radical church requires a commitment from its members that they will be accountable through spiritual direction to others in the community. At the same time this church runs a raft of programmes in to the surrounding community ranging from a shelter for men with Aids, to a restaurant and a hospital for the homeless.

God calls each of us to love our neighbour. It is hard to say whether that neighbour is more important as part of a social programme, or as a member of a family. I rather suspect that to God there is not much difference. Perhaps what is more important is

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<sup>8</sup> *ibid*,p167.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Renner *The Church of the Saviour: A Radical Experiment*

that the love of one's neighbour and the motivation to offer such love in sacrificial ways be there.

In calling us to love our neighbour, he does not call each of us to be the same.

*“Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us.”<sup>10</sup>*

The passage continues to list different gifts: prophesy, serving, teaching, encouraging, contributing to the needs of others, leadership, and mercy. We are not all called to minister to the poor and the homeless. Many of us have different gifts, which may be more fully discovered in the process of journey with God, and in spiritual direction.

The concerns with which this research began have been either not validated by those interviewed in this study or refuted. While these people had probably become more aware of their inward journey, they did not develop a “false inwardness.” A few of those interviewed had left their church, the majority had not. The life of faith for all of them seems to balance individual journey and relationship with others. Although these directees were not active in the type of social programmes one assumes were meant, this is not a major concern.

### ***What then in a wider sense, were the outcomes, for these directees of being in direction?***

#### **People who are in direction grow.**

They learn about themselves; who they really are. They learn to face up to their weaknesses and their God-giftedness. They struggle, they surrender and they learn acceptance. They are courageous people who question, welcome challenge and value honesty.

#### **People who are in direction learn to love God.**

They find God is more loving, more compassionate and more tender than before. Often God appears to become both bigger and more intimate. They find that they meet God in new ways and in new places.

#### **People in direction learn to follow God's call in their lives.**

They become people of spiritual journey. In uncovering who they were made to be, they uncover where they might best serve.

#### **People who are in direction learn to love their God with all their heart and soul and mind. They learn too how to love their neighbour as themselves.**

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<sup>10</sup> Romans 12: 4 –7.

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## Appendix: The Questionnaire

Please note that any information obtained will be confidential, and if referred to in research findings, individuals will remain anonymous.

### 1. Basic Information

Sex, age, career /work, family commitments.

### 2. Spiritual Direction

How long have you been receiving direction?

What led you to begin direction?

Has your experience of spiritual direction been largely positive/negative? What made it so?

Has spiritual direction been of more use to you over a sustained period, or would you say that it was of more use to you at certain times (crisis, life changes, decision making etc)?

What changes, if any, have occurred in your life since you began direction?

### 3. Relationship with God

Has your theology changed? Do you view God differently?

Or relate to God in different ways?

### 4. Church affiliation

From what denominational background do you come? Has this affiliation changed at any stage and why. Has attending spiritual direction had any impact on your church community?

How important is spiritual direction in maintaining and building your faith?

### 5. Relationship with others

Has spiritual direction impacted on your relationships? How?

Are you involved in activities such as evangelism, social action, outreach of any sort?

Has this involvement been influenced by spiritual direction?

### 6. Relationship with self

Has spiritual direction affected your knowledge of yourself?

Do you feel any differently about yourself, place, roles in the world?

Has it affected your life's goals or outlook?

### 7. What Enneagram and Myers Briggs types are you (if known)?

### 8. Problems, pitfalls, difficulties

Do you see any / have you experienced any in spiritual direction?

### 9. Overall

What outcomes has spiritual direction had in your life?