How Directive Should Christian Spiritual Direction Be?

Directing Those Who Don't Desire Christian Community.

by

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Abstract

This essay poses the question of how a spiritual director might best assist a directee who is unwilling to engage in a practice that the director sees as fundamental to Christian spiritual growth. It uses the example of a directee who does not want to engage with the communal dimension of Christian life, whether that be in a church or a more informal faith group of some sort. It explores the fine balance that directors must hold in such a situation between imposing their views upon the directee (being too directive) and failing to assist the directee to face challenging issues of Christian discipleship (being too passive or non-directive).

Introduction

Christian approaches to spiritual direction have ranged over the years from the highly directive to strictly non-directive. Spiritual directors nowadays tend towards a non-directive approach where directees are assisted to focus on their own individual experience of God and form their own response to the activity of God in their lives. And yet a case can be made for a more directive approach from directors in cases where directees are not willing to engage with issues that the director considers to be fundamental to Christian spiritual life and growth.

Christian spiritual direction cannot be value-free. To warrant the definition of Christian it needs to be true to Christ and the fundamental Christian values and understandings that come from his teachings and life. But what does being true to Christ really entail in a situation where a directee is not willing to engage in a practice that could be considered as a Christian fundamental? For example, what is required of a spiritual director when a directee is not willing to belong to any Christian community or faith group, and this is one of the fundamentals that the director holds strongly? How can loyalty to Christ and his teachings be wisely balanced with the loyalty that the director also has to the welfare and integrity of a directee who simply does not want to engage with others as a member of the body of Christ?[1]

This essay is an attempt to hold in balance what could be seen as conflicting loyalties for Christian spiritual directors - loyalty to Christ's life and teachings mediated through the Christian tradition, and loyalty to the integrity of individuals who do not wish to belong to any Christian group.

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[1] Possible reasons for a directee's aversion to engagement with other Christians will be considered later in this essay.

Approaches to spiritual direction

While contemporary approaches to spiritual direction are generally non-directive, it is important to see them in their historical perspective. A strictly non-directive approach is not the only one, and indeed is quite a recent development. In early Christian centuries particularly, and even up until the twentieth century, it was quite common for spiritual directors to operate, either occasionally or generally, in a more directive manner. The spiritual director was typically seen as a spiritual father or mother, a teacher or a guide, who would not only encourage directees on their spiritual journey, but would also challenge and even correct them in matters relating to their spiritual life.[2]

This rather hierarchical approach to spiritual direction could function well, but it was (and still is) at times exercised in an interfering and overbearing way, to the detriment of the directee's own authentic spiritual journey. In the twentieth century, with its anti-authoritarian and individualistic ethos, new and more client-centred approaches to spiritual direction gained sway.[3] *God's* role in spiritual direction was emphasised, and spiritual directors were seen more as *accompanying* their directees who were guided by God on their own unique spiritual journeys.[4]

While this more modern approach to spiritual direction is life-giving in its emphasis on God's own free action within the directee's life, it has potential limitations as well. In the introduction to the revised edition of his book *Soul Friend*, Kenneth Leech voices a number of concerns about contemporary developments in spiritual direction. Notable amongst these, in terms of the subject of this essay, is Leech's concern that

> "much spiritual direction assumes a view of spirituality which is not wholesome and only tenuously Christian, and which reflects the individualism and privatization of religion in the West rather than any embodiment in a corporate tradition."[5]

Leech highlights the dangers that exist when the emphases of classical Christian spirituality are minimised or jettisoned in favour of contemporary spiritual and cultural movements. If spiritual directors are not willing to point unequivocally to the basic elements of a Christian spiritual life, then such spiritual direction will be "only tenuously Christian". Leech's argument implies that Christian spiritual

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[2] While classical writers would at times use less directive images for the spiritual director's role (such as Dom Augustine Baker's description of the director as "God's usher"), the majority of images from the classical tradition are more directive. (See Neufelder and Coelho, *Writings on Spiritual Direction*, pp. 17ff.

[3] There are complex cultural reasons for this modern trend towards anti-authoritarianism and individualism. Among the many who have written on this topic and its influence on church culture, see, e.g. Brian Carrell, *Moving Between Times*, and Michael Riddell, *Threshold of the Future*.

[4] Neufelder and Coelho, *op. cit.*, pp. 26-32.

directors may sometimes need to take a more directive stance, not only accompanying others on their spiritual journey wherever that might lead, but also inviting them to respond to Christ's challenging teachings on the call to discipleship and costly engagement with the world. Of course, directors themselves must be on this same spiritual journey, and be committed to "a life of prayer, discipleship and the struggle for holiness".[6]

Overly directive spiritual direction then will typically press directees into a mould that has been pre-determined by the spiritual director. This is likely to hinder directees from developing their own individual relationship with God, and to limit their journey of spiritual discovery. On the other hand, too great an emphasis in direction on the individual's spiritual journey alone, without the balance of the Christian spiritual tradition, has its own risk. A directee may end up on an individualised path that is more indicative of the directee's personal spiritual preferences than of an authentic engagement with God.[7] Both extremes of spiritual direction practice have risks.

Spiritual directors should therefore avoid being doctrinaire about the model of direction they use. Generally the non-directive practice of reflective and focused listening will be most helpful to directees. But at times it will be helpful to be more directive in encouraging directees to engage with some reality or practice outside themselves, for example a challenging Bible passage or one of the classical spiritual disciplines. The key issue is not whether spiritual direction is less or more directive, but the degree to which directors are free and willing to act in whatever way necessary to assist the directee's Christian spiritual growth.[8]

Directors and church belonging
Directors, particularly those who are clergy or who are firmly committed to Christian belonging, may hold strong views as they work with a directee who does not want to be involved in Christian community. Their personal views (and the associated feelings) may limit these directors' freedom to act in their directee's interests. For example, an inner mono-logue of "shoulds" and "oughts" would be liable to prevent them from listening effectively to their directee. The Parable of the Lost Son (Luke 15:11-32), interpreted in the light of Christian belonging,

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[5] Leech, *Soul Friend*, pp. xvii-xviii. For a similar critique see Michael Riddell, *op. cit.*, pp. 60-61.
[6] Leech, *op. cit.*, p. xviii.
[7] Maurice Andrew comments, "religion is not about the way some individ-uals want it, but about the way it is" (*Responding in Community*, p. 171.)
[8] It is no simple matter to help a directee to grow in relationship with God in a way that is truly personal but also authentically Christian, appropriate to the individual but not idiosyncratic. And yet I would argue that this is the task of the Christian spiritual director. It demands of the director a depth of spiritual wisdom and humility, and a commitment to both Christ and the directee.

helps identify some of the attitudes and feelings that such directors may need to address before they would be truly free to act for their directee's benefit.

In this parable we could see the younger son as the one who leaves the 'family' or community of faith. People may walk away from Christian belonging for many different reasons, and the son's reasons for wanting his inheritance early are not expressly stated. But having received his inheritance, he exercises his freedom without restraint, until his money comes to an end. Then, after a time of suffering, he again freely decides that he will return to his father.

The father is acquiescent in the first part of the story. He would be perfectly within his rights to deny the younger son's request, but he freely allows him to receive his inheritance. While those moving out of churches are often pressurised by other members or those in authority to stay members of a church, God does not force anyone to remain "part of the family" in terms of their church belonging. But that does not mean that a person's belonging to a church or a faith group is not important to God. After all, the father in the story is overjoyed when the son returns. It just suggests that God leaves us free to do what we choose about belonging (and that Christians would be well advised to do the same).[9]

The most important character in the story from the point of view of this discussion, however, is the elder son. What do his actions and attitudes suggest about his state of mind? For a start, the elder son is angry at the younger one for doing his own thing. He seems to resent his brother's freedom to live it up, when he himself has been "slaving" on the farm. Anger, of course, frequently covers up other emotions. Perhaps under the anger there is some hurt and loneliness, stemming from the fact that his younger brother just left him to get on with it. There is also the sense that the father has not duly rewarded him for his hard work and loyalty to the father and the family business.

It may be valuable for directors who have set views on church belonging to examine themselves for some of the attitudes and feelings identified above. (Good supervision will also be beneficial here.) Why do they want the directee to belong to church? Because they envy the freedom from church belonging that others seem to enjoy? Because they are lonely and miss the fellowship of others? Because they feel overworked and want others' support? If directors can identify within themselves any such attitudes of self-concern, then it will obviously be

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[9] In *A Churchless Faith*, Alan Jamieson gives numerous examples of church leavers who felt pressured and misrepresented by their churches as they disengaged. He also commends a church that provides positive and freeing ministry to individuals who are struggling with their church belonging (pp. 142-144).

important for them to work through their own issues so that they can be as free as possible to act in the best interests of their directees' spiritual growth.

This reflection raises the issue of how directors understand their own church belonging, and the Church itself. Whether directors are pro- or anti-Church, or somewhere in between, their view of the Church (as of any other aspect of Christian life and discipleship) is likely to influence the direction that they offer. Where Christian tradition has highly valued a particular spiritual practice such as corporate worship or Christian fellowship, it is important that directors be open to understanding that practice's value. Otherwise, through a lack of understanding or imagination, the director may end up by "selling their directees short" in a key area of spiritual life.

The father's reply to the elder son is significant here: "Son, you are always with me and all that I have is yours." The father reminds his son that the son is distracted by his own issues from enjoying the most important thing of all – the father's presence, and the blessings that flow from that. The Church is so much more than a duty to be shared – or an imposition to be avoided. It is (at least potentially) a means of grace because it offers a way into the presence of God that is not accessible to an isolated individual. This at last is a valid reason for wanting directees to engage with Christian community. It has the potential to enrich their spiritual lives. If directors cannot identify this potential for good in Christian belonging then, as Christians who influence the lives of others, they may need to revision their understanding of the Church.[10]

This revisioning, and indeed the reinvention of Church, is a key task for Christians in Aotearoa/New Zealand and the western world today as church belonging continues to decline.[11] Although it is not a core function of the spiritual director to create an alternative Christian community, this is one valid response to the needs for Christian community of those who have moved out of churches for any number of reasons. At the least, spiritual directors should know enough about their local churches to be able to recommend an accepting and spiritually healthy

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[10] See, for example, Archbishop Rowan Williams' lecture, entitled "The Christian Priest Today", where he seeks to broaden his listeners view of what the Church is. "…the Church is first of all a kind of space cleared by God through Jesus in which people may become what God made them to be (God's sons and daughters), and…what we have to do about the Church is not first to organise it as a society but to inhabit it as a climate or a landscape. It is a place where we can see properly - God, God's creation, ourselves. It is a place or dimension in the universe that is in some way growing towards being the universe itself in restored relation to God. It is a place we are invited to enter, the place occupied by Christ, who is himself the climate and atmosphere of a renewed universe…. Forget this, and you're stuck with a faith that depends heavily on what individuals decide and on what goes on inside your head." This is a much grander, more mystical and more inviting view of the Church than is normally operative.

[11] An especially helpful book to read on this topic is Michael Riddell's *Threshold of the Future.* In pages 157-171 Riddell describes a number of alternative church models in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

church or faith group to directees who are willing to try engaging with other Christ-ians either for the first time, or after a period of "time out".

Church leavers

In his books *A Churchless Faith* and *Called Again*, Alan Jamieson charts the faith journey of more than a hundred church leavers over a five-year period. He notes that many of those formerly committed church members who leave Evangelical, Pentecostal or Charismatic (EPC) churches do so not because they are "back-sliding" or giving up on God, but because they feel that their churches have become a hindrance to their spiritual growth. In general these leavers have not lost or rejected their faith, but their faith has often grown or changed in a way that differentiates them from the theological position of others in their churches or from their church's theological position itself.

In his work Jamieson draws on James Fowler's research on the stages of faith development.[12] Fowler identifies six stages of faith and argues that development in a person's faith position and understanding over time is perfectly normal, and analogous to normal patterns or stages of human development – childhood, adolescence, adulthood etc. [13] Each stage of faith has distinctive characteristics, and as a person progresses through the stages, that person tends to leave behind old views and ways of seeing God and the world, in a process of transition to new understandings.

Jamieson uses Fowler's research to suggest that EPC churches and church-goers are often found at the third stage of faith development, the synthetic-conventional or "loyalist" stage as Jamieson labels it. Leaders and members of churches at stage three commonly view those who differ from them theologically as being in error, and church leaders in particular are likely to respond to those who differ from them in a defensive and threatened manner. They may not have sufficient knowledge of the traditions of Christian spirituality to realise that journeying on through stages of faith is a normal part of Christian spiritual growth. And so EPC church members who are being drawn from the third into the fourth and further stages of faith not only go through an often disorientating and troubling shift in their faith stance, they also tend to find misunderstanding and even hostility in their churches. This frequently hastens their departure.

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[12] Fowler's research is outlined most fully in his book, *Stages of Faith*. For summaries of Fowler's research see Jamieson, *A Churchless Faith*, pp. 121-133, *Called Again*, pp. 109-116, and also Andrew Pritchard's article, "Fowler, Faith and Fallout", in *Reality* 33, 1999.

[13] The first two stages of faith, intuitive-projective faith and mythic-literal faith, relate largely to the development of perception in the early stages of childhood. Adults tend to be in one of the next three stages, synthetic-conventional faith, individuative-reflective faith or conjunctive faith. Very few ever reach the sixth stage, universalising faith.

Where this has been the experience of those who leave EPC churches because of their own personal faith development, it is unlikely that they will be in any hurry to attend church again. Spiritual directors will need to bear this clearly in mind as they offer ministry to such church leavers. But it is also interesting to note from Jamieson's research that church leavers quite often resume a degree of involvement with a church or a faith group at a later stage.[14] It is also worth noting that church leavers who come to spiritual direction are still willing to make a connection with the Christian community through the spiritual director.[15]

Those who do not want to engage in Christian community may formerly have been church members, or they may never have gone to church. The discussion above notes that the reasons for their unwillingness to engage may be strong, deeply felt and understandable. Spiritual directors will need to listen to and acknowledge the reasons for their directees' unwillingness to be involved with the Christian community. The issue of Christian belonging must not be raised in such a way as to deny the reality of directees' experience. But after their experience has been validated, and as the directees journey further on with God, they can be encouraged to reflect on the implications for their life of Christ's call to community.

Two types of discourse in spiritual direction

Spiritual directors must first and foremost be willing and able to listen to the spiritual experience of their directees. This listening will ideally be exercised not just as a technique, but as an expression of a genuine interest in the welfare of their directees.

Of course, spiritual direction is a conversation between two people, and so directors are not simply passive listeners. Their listening involves a variety of responses that serve to explore or deepen the spiritual experiences that their direct-ees bring to direction, thus helping directees to savour and recognise more fully the divine presence in their lives.[16] This focused listening to directees' spiritual experience is the first and primary type of discourse customary in spiritual direction.[17]

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[14] "When I went back to the church leavers I interviewed five years ago and asked them about their faith over the last five plus years there was a significant influence of faith groups in people's individual faith journeys. Of those who went on to develop a stronger and more definite Christian faith the vast majority were part of such groups." (*Called Again*, p. 152.)

[15] Jamieson notes that "counselling and spiritual direction are often important components on this part of the journey", where church leavers journey with God beyond the church. (*A Churchless Faith*, p. 142.)

[16] It also involves listening to God in the interests of the directee.

[17] Indeed, Barry and Connolly would see this as the *only* form of discourse appropriate to spiritual direction. See, e.g., their statement that "teaching, preaching and moral guidance are not the proper task of spiritual directors. Their task is to help people experience God's action and respond to him. Fostering discovery rather than teaching doctrine is their purpose." (*The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, p. 43.)

A second type of discourse that often arises in spiritual direction is dialogue about prayer and the other Christian spiritual disciplines.[18]   This is generally not imposed by directors as an additional programme but arises fairly naturally out of spiritual direction sessions.   However, it does require of directees at times a willingness to consider spiritual practices that are beyond their current experience.

Directees may possibly not want to engage in this type of discourse, and so it is helpful for directors who consider that this is a valid part of spiritual direction to explain what they would expect to include in spiritual direction. If a directee does not want to engage in this type of discussion, then a decision may be reached by either party that this particular spiritual direction relationship should not continue. However, if this area of discussion is willingly accepted by directees, then directors will have the right to raise with those who are not involved in a Christian group the topic of engagement with the Christian community and communal worship. This will, of course, need to be done at the appropriate time, and in a way that is invitational, rather than overly directive.

Conclusion

This essay has discussed issues relating to the direction of those who, for whatever reason, do not desire Christian community. It is clear from Christian experience that there are times and seasons in people's spiritual life, and that many people go through a period or periods of not attending church or engaging with Christian community to any great degree.   This does not necessarily limit their overall spiritual growth as Christians, and a spiritual direction relationship can be very helpful in assisting people to keep growing outside the Church.

A distinction could helpfully be made here between people who for some reason and for a period do not want to engage in Christian community, and those who see no need at all for communal worship or other engagement with Christians. The former can be seen as being at a particular stage of their spiritual journey, which may (or may not) eventually bring them back to some form of communal engagement.   The role of the spiritual director here is to journey with them beyond the Church for as long as that takes, not ignoring the communal dimension of faith, but certainly not pressurising directees to re-engage with that communal dimension.

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[18] In *Orientations*, Vol 2 Part B, chapter 33, John Veltri S.J. provides a "random listing" of 26 things that "a spiritual guide would assume, deal with, look for, hope that a directee will have developed through the early stages of spiritual direction". This list, which includes the "meaning of and need for communal worship and sacraments", involves a number of things that would only be identified through the second type of discourse.

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The latter would seem to be more blocked in their spiritual growth, because they are unable to identify value in a spirit-ual practice that has been well-attested as a means of grace in the Christian tradition. It would seem to be appropriate to help directees to become aware of the discrepancy here, and to invite them to engage with God about it. Of course, the director's role here is not to *answer* for directees the question of Christian communal involvement, but to *put* it.[19] Some will simply not be ready to engage with this question or with the Christian community, and directors may need to wait for some time before re-presenting this issue in a different and possibly more engaging form.

Be that as it may, directees' spiritual lives are greater than any particular Christian practice, however fundamental it is deemed to be. In the context of the spiritual direction relationship, directors will notice whether directees are growing spiritually or not. Where there is clear growth in other areas of the directees' spiritual life, directors will find it easier to trust that God will raise the issue of communal engagement (or whatever the particular issue of concern to the director is) in God's good time. Here the key thing is the overall move-ment of the directee's life, rather than any specific issues. If the movement is towards Christ and Christian maturity, then it would probably be counter-productive to disengage from that positive movement in order to wrestle with something that may at that stage be more the director's issue than the directee's.

Considerable wisdom, then, is needed, to discern what will be most helpful to the directee in such situations. Invitations to spiritual growth must not be ruled out because they might be too directive, but on the other hand they should not be urged upon directees regardless of what else is taking place in their spiritual life. In the final analysis, the director's loyalty to Christ will be expressed in respecting God's movement in the directee while also maintaining the hope and belief that God is always inviting directees (and their directors) to grow in the life of faith.

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[19] Karl Barth makes the observation that "It is God's own affair to specify to each individual the form of the commandment determined and proper for him" [or her]. (Karl Barth *Church Dogmatics*, p.72, quoted in Tilden Edwards, *Sabbath Time*, p.114.) I understand this to mean that some issues in Christian life – and I would view communal engagement to be among these – are fundamentals. How that fundamental is to be lived out in a person's life, though, is for the individual to work out with God.

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