

# **Invited into Life: The Gifts and Challenges of Spiritual Direction with People with Learning Difficulties**

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My experience and formation in the L'Arche Kapiti Community over many years has shown me the profound and unique gifts people with learning disabilities have in their experience and understanding of spirituality. While working in a pastoral role there and training as a spiritual director I noticed a desire from the people with disabilities to share and grow in their spirituality. I also noticed a possible difference in how spiritual direction might be offered to people with learning difficulties, compared with people who do not have learning difficulties.

This research paper aims to explore the gifts and challenges of spiritual direction with people with learning difficulties. Primarily I do this by finding themes in the stories from the three directors I interviewed who had experience directing people with learning difficulties; one directee with disabilities I interviewed who had experience with spiritual direction, and the directee I have been directing this year.

My directee met me with a rush at my car door. "Hurry, we're going to church" she said.

"What about our session?" I asked.

"My faith is important to me" she replied.

Ouch. I know. That's why I thought I was there. Begrudgingly, I drove to her church. We were very late and had in fact arrived right at the celebration of the Eucharist – a quiet, sacred, somewhat serious time. The building was jam-packed. I stood in the foyer behind a sea of bodies. My directee took my arm. "I sit at the front" she said. We marched up the centre aisle to the front row. I cringed with embarrassment at each step. When we sat, I noticed behind us sat friends with disabilities. One of the women was the kaikaranga [the woman who calls visitors onto a marae], and welcomed the Eucharist with a powerful call, bringing tears to my eyes. Beside us were elderly and wheelchair users. To our side were other mutual friends who waved with excitement at seeing us. My directee deeply belonged in this parish. She was part of the Body of Christ. She participated in the familiar liturgy. Her presence was a gift that completed the parish, and the parish welcomed her. While sharing parish panui [notices] afterwards, I noticed that many groups, educational programmes and activities were offered, of which my directee was a part. She was not just a part of this parish on a Sunday, but throughout the week. My directee had invited me into life, her spiritual life in this shared activity. Rather than reflecting on it with words, she was showing me by inviting me to watch or participate in it. I now had a glimmer of how my directee encountered Jesus. I felt the warmth and welcome of that belonging. So, we had a mutual spiritual experience. And we were connected in a new way because of that. This changed how I conceptualized spiritual direction with my directee. My directee was able to invite me to participate with her in activities which embodied her faith. This experience showed me the need for practical, embodied activities, the need for belonging in a faith group and trusted relationships, and the need for sensory activities when directing a person with learning disabilities. Also, it taught me to be flexible, to not hold an agenda for someone

else, and my own poverty in not knowing the best way forward at times. I will explore these learnings separately.

## **Relationship**

Each director I interviewed named relationship as something essential when directing a person with learning disabilities. There seem to be a few reasons for this. What I experienced was the directee inviting me into a mutual experience which created connection between us, and between the directee and God. Having these mutual experiences in shared activities leads to trust over time.

In different ways the directors I spoke with said that they needed to know a person's interests so they could find creative activities the directee was able to use as a tool for reflection. Similarly, another interviewee said it was important to find how people prefer to creatively express themselves, whether through piano playing, dance, or another form, so the directee could be invited to do this, or have the possibility to do this during a session. While it is possible to find these things out in a spiritual direction session, having a connection or relationship outside the sessions reveals this more fully. Having a prior connection, or connection outside of sessions allows the person with disabilities to put the director in context, to feel safe and build trust with the director. Sometimes the directee with disabilities may have some barriers to being understood. Familiarity in how the directee communicates, whether through body language or a core board helps the director to understand what the directee is saying and communicate in a way that the directee will understand. One director interviewed said she continually checked in with her directee to clarify what was being said, to avoid miscommunications<sup>1</sup>.

Research shows that people with disabilities often feel ostracized from faith spaces due to inaccessibility to full participation, and oppressive theologies about disability.<sup>2</sup> Research also shows that friendship is a primary way people with learning disabilities get their spiritual needs met.<sup>3</sup> In light of this research, it is worth visiting how spiritual direction might be offered to people with disabilities to incorporate friendship outside of the Direction sessions, and mutual spiritual experiences such as attending church together.

## **Group settings and buddies**

Related to the topic of relationships is the place of retreats or group spiritual direction. Each person I interviewed had participated in or facilitated a mixed ability guided retreat. This

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<sup>1</sup> \*Cherie, interview by author, face to face, July 18, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Nancy Eiesland, "Encountering the Disabled God," Conference on Disability Studies and the University, Cambridge University Press.

<sup>3</sup> John Swinton, "spirituality and the Lives of people with Learning Disabilities," *Updates: The foundation for People with Learning Disabilities* vol 3, issue 6 (2001).

seemed to work for a few reasons. This meets a need for belonging and connection for the person with disabilities. It also is a safe space, as there are others present so possibly less threatening. Also, often the somewhat familiar (if people have attended church) structure of a guided retreat creates a container or framework where people with disabilities are able to contribute and participate, rather than an entirely new situation. I will expand on why this is necessary in the next section. Boundaries and expectations are modelled by others and may be clearer than a less structured or one to one session. During retreats, there may be more flexibility for participation, extended processing time, and breaks. This may be helpful for the directee. One director shared that she continually invited the directee back into participation with the group and supported the directee to share and reflect their art, with encouragement.

While leading a Seasons for Growth programme (a programme to reflect on and process loss and grief) for adults with learning disabilities, one director said each person with a disability had a buddy. The buddy checked in with the person with disabilities about understanding a theme and supported the person with disabilities to create art in response to the theme. This buddy system is a possibility for mixed ability guided retreats.

People with disabilities also may need support people, buddies, or family members to assist them in various ways during a one-to-one spiritual direction session. It may be for interpretation between directee and director. It may be for emotional support, or physical support such as toileting. There may even be a place for the direction relationship to look more like buddies or friendship, with people with disabilities. That is, people doing activities of shared interest and reflecting on them together.

## **Accessible Participation**

Conventional spiritual direction is often intellectual in that it requires a memory of an event, subsequent emotions, and language to articulate the reflection on these. Assuming straight dialogue will occur through asking reflective questions to elicit reflective or conceptual responses often does not seem to initiate a response from a person with learning difficulties. This is possibly because people with learning difficulties may understand in literal and concrete terms rather than conceptual or analytical ones.<sup>4</sup> A more guided approach with practical and sensory activities seems to invite participation. For example, if a scripture, concept, prayer, question, song, or theme is introduced, inviting the directee to create a poster, collage, quilt, or drawing about it might allow them to reflect on it. Or offering tangible objects or pictures to choose which symbolizes how they are feeling. Offering a practical application or asking what a practical application in life might be, further assists in the action/reflection spiral. For example, one director I interviewed read the scripture of loving your neighbour, and then invited people to massage each other's hands to reflect a

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<sup>4</sup> Maureen D'Eath et al, "Guidelines for Research When Interviewing People with an Intellectual Disability," National Federation of Volunteer Bodies, Oranmore, Galway, 2005.

practical and symbolic act of loving one's neighbour. Another director, after prayer, suggested their directee walk in a meditation garden.

The directee with difficulties whom I interviewed found that having something tangible after her session was very helpful. She had a display book with clear envelopes where she put print-outs of prayers, pictures, and an outline of what was spoken about that she had co-created with someone from each session.<sup>5</sup> She could refer to and remember the sessions with this.

## **Liturgy, Symbols and Ritual**

Related to making participation accessible, each director interviewed mentioned the importance of liturgy. That is, having a set structure that is repeated, predictable and familiar to the directee's faith experience. This helped to set the scene with the directee/s. It contextualizes the experience as one of exploring faith.

Liturgy uses prayer, song, and rituals which are often memorized, that people with disabilities can participate in and contribute to by leading or choosing aspects – e.g. song choice.<sup>6</sup> This allows for agency within a guided situation. Liturgy is celebrated together, as a Body of Christ, so it is relational. This meets the possible spiritual need for connection and belonging a directee might have.

Ritual in liturgy uses sensory symbols. For example, taste in Eucharist, smell of incense, sight of flame in candles, touch with rosary, palm crosses, the sign of the cross, or passing of peace. Actions, sign language and pictures can be used to show thanksgiving, intercession, and repentance rather than words. *Lectio divina* can be used as an imaginative exercise for scripture reading. Sensory ritual can bypass cognition and work at a more intuitive level. This activity which may combine encounter and reflection on encounter is helpful for those who struggle with cognitive processing. In essence, ritual is making the sacred visible through repeatable actions. So, many familiar rituals can be used, and new ones co-created to suit the situation or need of the directee. One director shared that she used the act of gardening, specifically seed sowing with her directees.<sup>7</sup> One area to be aware of is if the directee would like to question aspects of their faith experience, or experiment with new expressions of faith. This becomes difficult if the director is relying on elements used in the directee's current faith stream during the direction session.

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<sup>5</sup> \*Catherine, interview by author, zoom video call, August 17, 2023.

<sup>6</sup> Leon Armand Van Ommen and Jopher Endress, "Reframing Liturgical Theology Through the Lens of Autism: A Qualitative Study of Autistic Experience of Worship," *Studia Liturgica* 52 (2022): 219-234.

<sup>7</sup> \*Tamzin, Interview by author, zoom video call, July 19, 2023.

## **Embodied Experience**

Each director I spoke to talked about the importance of body. One director gave the reflection that this may be because often people with disabilities have experienced a rejection of their bodies by being discriminated against. Activities such as dance invite and accept one's body just as it is. This can be a validation of body. Also, an embodied activity, such as liturgy, dance, action song, a sacramental or ritual act like feet washing, reenacting scripture, or walking the stations of the cross bypasses the need for language and analytical reflecting, and instead allows a person to be present to an experience in a full and unguarded way. A person's whole self is an offering and celebration in a spiritual encounter.

One director said that often people with disabilities might embody the emotion or essence of a scripture through reenactment. She gave the example of walking the way of the cross with a small community of people with mixed ability during Easter. The man who was to carry the cross at the last moment changed his mind. He did not want to, but then did so anyway in a begrudging way. This embodied the reality of the Cross in a new way for the director. While this might be a profound encounter for both parties, it also highlights the possible dangers of power imbalance when engaging in spiritual direction in a relational way through mutual experiences. It is important for the director to keep these questions at the forefront: For whose benefit is this activity? Can the directee authentically say no or yes to an activity? People with learning disabilities may do or say something because they believe this is what the director wants. This is called induced acquiescence.<sup>8</sup> It is important to find ways to counter this.

## **Boundaries and Expectations**

Each director interviewed also mentioned boundaries. That is, they had to be prepared to edit their own expectations and boundaries, and also at times clearly set out expectations and boundaries in a way that they may not with directees who do not have learning difficulties. Brené Brown writes that clarity is kindness.<sup>9</sup> For someone who is neurodiverse and may not pick up on expectations such as listening to fellow retreatants when they are sharing, or knowing when it is appropriate to share their own insights, it is important to make instructions clear. It may seem overly guided, but, if there are unspoken expectations, clarity among parties is important. Conversely, people with learning disabilities may have unexpected behaviour that challenges the director's assumptions of what might work in a spiritual direction session. For example, my directee wanted to attend a church service. I initially did not think this was spiritual direction and was frustrated that our plans changed. The change gave my directee agency, and it gave me a whole change in perspective. Though, the following month when my directee wanted to us to go on an hour's drive, I said no, as I could not make this work.

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<sup>8</sup> D'Eath, *Guidelines for Research*.

<sup>9</sup> Brené Brown, *Dare to Lead: Brave Work, Tough Conversations, Whole Hearts* (Ebury Publishing, 2019).

## Time

Each director and directee mentioned time as something to be aware of in the spiritual direction relationship with people with disabilities. One director explained that instead of sitting for one hour a month, they met face to face for ten minutes, as that was the attention span the directee could participate in. After this session, the director would type the contents of what they had talked about, adding any scriptures or songs mentioned. She would send this to her directee as a document. The directee would then add pictures found from the internet to match what they had talked about, and how she interpreted the scripture. Finally, a ten minute follow up Zoom call or phone call to allow the directee to share their reflections once they had added pictures to the document was had. This may be an hour's spiritual direction a month, but not all in one sitting or in one place.

Though some people with disabilities may have shorter attention spans, they may also need extended time to process and reflect on an issue. An activity such as finding pictures in their own time, or collage may help with this. The directee above spent time finding pictures over two weeks. This catered to the attention span as well as processing time of the directee.

Part of spiritual direction is making time to be present with God and noticing the movement of God in our everyday lives. Many people with learning difficulties are able to be present to their body, emotions and the spirit in the moment they are in. Because they cannot rely on their cognitive ability to clutter up a moment, they may bring a gift of presence to spiritual direction that many others without learning difficulties work hard to achieve.<sup>10</sup>

## Gifts and Challenges

One of the aspects of being present to a moment is bringing one's whole self to that moment to fully experience it. Each director I interviewed mentioned they noticed this with people with learning disabilities. That is, the people with disabilities brought their whole selves, seen in their joy when dancing and singing. They seemed to have fewer protective barriers or pretense in such activities. This overflow of joy was a gift to the directors when they witnessed it – it brought out a joy in them. One director reflected that this ability to be vulnerable allowed the director also to be authentic without pretense.<sup>11</sup>

Another gift a director mentioned was the depth of insight in the simplicity of answers or reflections the directees gave. She gave this example: a man with a learning disability was reflecting on and praying for Easter celebrations. He said "Baby Jesus. Jesus on the Cross. I love Jesus." She said this struck her. This was the Gospel summed up in 3 sentences.<sup>12</sup> There

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<sup>10</sup> John Swinton, *Becoming Friends of Time: Disability, Timefullness and Gentle Discipleship* (Texas: Baylor University Press, 2018).

<sup>11</sup> \*Sharon, interview by author, face to face, July 17, 2023.

<sup>12</sup> \*Tamzin, interview by author, zoom video call, July 19, 2023

was no need for lengthy intellectual discussions. The depth in the simplicity of how a person with learning difficulties articulates a reflection can be enriching, profound and bring unique perspective. This is good to remember, too, when no articulation occurs, as profound encounters may still be happening. For example, when relating with someone who is non-verbal.

Another reoccurring gift mentioned, which was also a challenge at the same time, was that the directors were faced with their own disability in situations. For example, one director shared about having a woman with cerebral palsy in her catechism class. This young woman needed assistance with wiping her face when she involuntarily dribbled. The director shared that she found this off-putting. So, she had to face her own discriminatory attitude. After overcoming this, the director did not know practically how to support this woman. She had to face her own lack of knowledge in this area. While it is not the job of people with disabilities to teach the directors anything, this happens inadvertently and is a gift in the spiritual direction relationship.

### **Other Areas for Reflection and Learning:**

This research is in no way a comprehensive or definitive account of learning difficulty and spiritual direction. Four themes emerge as areas for further study:

1. Having well informed supervision to navigate the terrain of friendship outside of spiritual direction and having mutual spiritual encounters, especially considering people with learning disabilities being a vulnerable population and power imbalances in the relationship being present.
2. Spiritual direction training programmes touching on directing people with learning disabilities.
3. People with learning disabilities having a higher rate of religious trauma than the wider population due to exclusion, institutionalization, and abuse. This is echoed in Koch and Strasburger's article featured in *Presence* two years ago.<sup>13</sup>
4. People with disabilities as directors.

It is also worth mentioning that while people with learning difficulties are often put together as one group, the diversity of ability, personality, life experience, and socio-economic status is as diverse as the wider population. In fact, we are all part of the same diverse but common humanity.

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<sup>13</sup> Steven M. Koch and Amy M. Strasburger, "spiritual direction of Individuals with Intellectual Disability," *Presence: An International Journal of spiritual direction* vol.27, no.2 (June 2021): 24-36.



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