

# **Living the questions: Young adults exploring the potential of Spiritual Direction**

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*My ideas of God have been piling up. For the last few years or so, I have felt like I have to climb over questions every time I must act. Think of it like Heaven's door. Instead of knocking and waiting for an answer, I either knock and run away, or I decide to learn everything I can about God before I knock on the door, so that when the door is answered I will be ready. But my idea of God has changed from thinking I know it all, to realizing that I don't know much of anything. With that change, my search for God is now scary and very urgent<sup>1</sup> (Dalton, 2006).*

In a cultural context of information saturation and 1-click answers via devices that rarely leave our bodies – it's not surprising that the 'unknown' is a frightening state to find oneself in. Added to this existential kind of anxiety, the often-poor mental health of young people today suggests a particular context for Spiritual Directors to provide an intentional space to support and encourage spiritual growth for younger directees. What are some of the themes that come up for this age-group and how can Spiritual Directors be equipped to help young adults 'live their questions'<sup>2</sup>?

My sense is that the contemplative stream of faith can provide very practical ways to develop a "lifelong capacity for listening for that still small voice, reflection and contemplation" (Hart, 2005, 27). Spiritual accompaniment may also be a place of refuge for anxious young people as they concern themselves with understanding identity, meaning and purpose for their lives.

A lack of purpose or meaning appears to contribute to poor mental health. Research finds that youth and adults who lack a purpose in life report poorer psychological health and higher levels of psychological distress (Debats, 1998, 79). Victor Frankl's (1946) famous psychological book *Man's Search for Meaning*<sup>3</sup> had sold over 10 million copies at the time of his death in 1997 – just one example of humanity's enduring fascination with discovering how to endure suffering and move forward in life with purpose.

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<sup>1</sup> Quote from Evan Harrison a young student participating in the study.

<sup>2</sup> Idea attributed to Rainer Maria Rilke (1903) from his poem "Letters to a Young Poet" – "I would like to beg you dear Sir, as well as I can, to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves... Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer".

<sup>3</sup> *Man's Search for Meaning* by Viktor Frankl describes his experiences as an Auschwitz concentration camp inmate during World War II. The book intends to answer the question "How was everyday life in a concentration camp reflected in the mind of the average prisoner?" Part One constitutes Frankl's analysis of his experiences in the concentration camps, while Part Two introduces his ideas of meaning and his theory called logotherapy. Retrieved 20/10/18 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Man%27s\\_Search\\_for\\_Meaning](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Man%27s_Search_for_Meaning)

### *Young people, their mental health and spirituality*

Younger generations often reflect what we all collectively need to pay attention to; when listened to, their voices can wake us all up out of inertia and complacency. David Tacey (2003) sombrely notes: “Young people who become depressed, suicidal or fatigued in response to the hopelessness that confronts the world are living symbolic lives. Their struggles with meaning are not just personal struggles. They are trying to sort out the problems of society, and their sufferings, deaths and ruptures are not just personal tragedies but contributions to the spiritual dilemmas of the world” (p176).

A recent study by the New Zealand Union of Student’s Associations (Gharibi, 2018) surveyed 1,762 tertiary students and found that most respondents commonly experienced moderate levels of psychological distress<sup>4</sup>. Gender minorities and those self-identified as sexual minorities had the highest level of psychological distress, followed by females. Stress, anxiety, lack of energy or motivation, depression and feelings of hopelessness/worthlessness were the most common self-diagnosed issues by respondents. 686 respondents had experienced suicidal thoughts and 672 had thoughts of self-harm.

The Student Association report called for a culture change in how mental health is dealt with. “For too long there has been a ‘band-aid’ approach to dealing with the mental health crisis and in order to get to the root of the problem, we must as a nation, change our perceptions and misconceptions about what mental health is and how we help those who are struggling” (Gharibi, 2018, 116). This challenge requires a response too from spiritual leaders and practitioners - particularly those who see their vocation as helping others to open to a new sense of perspective, hope and love.

### *Telling stories and hope creation*

This is not to say that all young people who seek spiritual guidance struggle with their mental health, just as we do not assume that all elderly people struggle with coming to terms with aging. However, offering alternatives to the often-chaotic worlds young people inhabit can be an incredible gift to them. How can Spiritual Directors provide spaces for young people to wrestle with their stories? Expressing their inner worlds can quite simply be a doorway into hope - “they are hungry for enchantment given, not by society or its institutions, but by the spirit and its promise of new life” (Tacey, 2003). This approach is different from what religious and most youth programmes tend to offer young people. It’s

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<sup>4</sup> Determined by the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10). This screening tool focuses on anxiety and depression symptoms asking 10 questions on how respondents feel over the previous four weeks. Scores between 25 and 29 show that respondents may be experiencing moderate levels of distress. Scores between 30 and 50 may indicate severe levels of distress.

suggested that tending to young people's spiritual needs requires a combination of the wisdom found in contemplative spirituality along with the processes that seek to understand the metaphors they use to describe their own world (Tacey, 2003).

### *Contemplative spirituality and ministry to young people*

Tacey's description is ripe ground for Spiritual Direction and a challenge to contemporary Christian youth work. Contemplative spirituality and ministries like spiritual direction are not closed to youth and young adults for their faith formation, but nor are they necessarily actively promoted. There are perhaps some underlying assumptions held about faith formation and young people – and these require examination so that we can be present to the spiritual needs and concerns of young people.

In my search to discover whether anyone had tried to transform Christian youth work with these ideas, I found that Mark Yaconelli (2007) had ambitiously led such a project.<sup>5</sup> Mark writes “what does it mean to do youth ministry within a Christian culture in which listening to God is rarely practiced?... and youth ministers instead begin to listen to the anxious, predictable voice of society... The problem with this kind of leadership is that it is in direct contrast to the spirit of Jesus and the voice of the one who says, ‘come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest’” (p20).

Yaconelli's project was formed in response to a youth ministry culture that was becoming increasingly frantic, consumerist and spiritually stunted. It was an ‘attempt to combine the wisdom and prayer life of monks and mystics with the creativity and passion of teenagers and youth pastors’ (Yaconelli, 2007, 24). Introducing contemplative practices into youth ministry resulted in some youth ministries completely changing focus, and many young people and leaders expressing renewed hope in their awakened spiritual lives. It seemed abundantly clear that for hope to begin to thrive in this ministry, youth and their leaders needed tools to learn how to do less and listen more.

### *Spiritual Direction and young adults – an explorative approach*

With Yaconelli's work in mind, offering spiritual direction to young adults made a lot of sense to me. When given an opportunity to offer spiritual direction sessions at a young adult's Christian camp<sup>6</sup> I was

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<sup>5</sup> The Youth Ministry and Spirituality Project: to test whether contemplative spirituality could help heal damaging youth ministry as well as create youth cultures of spiritual safety. Damaging youth ministry was characterized by high youth leader and pastor burnout and programmes that fostered little spiritual input to youth.

<sup>6</sup> Andy Bank (Youth Pastor and SGM student) and I were invited to attend. When I was asked to give a notice in the main meeting, describing what spiritual direction is – I made a last-minute decision to tag on at the end for anyone

eager to find out how evangelical Christian young adults with no background in contemplative spirituality might respond. Yaconelli's work encouraged me to simply try out offering non-judgmental listening, space and quiet to anyone who wanted it – and then, to see what happened.

I drew on the experience<sup>7</sup> of directing seven young adults, aged 18-23 years, all female, who had never received Spiritual Direction before. Many were in some form of leadership role within their church context.

I was given a little cabin circa approximately 1950s. There was a small table, and before my first directee came I decided to put out some fairy lights, a holding cross, a couple of tea lights and a book of Joy Cowley's poems.

It was interesting to note the reaction of everyone who came into the room, they seemed genuinely relieved by the room and comfortable sharing their stories. Many of them picked up the objects, and one was so fascinated by a little LED light that I ended up giving it to her.

I found some common themes emerging from this group of directees (names and identifying details are changed for confidentiality). As a framework for the themes, I found that Alan Jamieson's Expressions of Faith table to be useful – comprising the categories: Conventional Faith Expression, Transitioning and Post-Conventional Faith Expression.<sup>8</sup> These young adults were all showing signs of transitioning while at the same time also holding a conventional expression of faith. Conventional expression focuses on what's right and wrong, identities are socially constructed, and the focus is on external authority. The 'external' themes that emerged all pointed to this style of faith. When transitioning, by contrast, questions and doubts arise, and the focus turns to internal authority for self-understanding, experience and truth. The status quo is challenged and there is more comfort self-authoring faith stories.

### *Working with anxiety*

Anxiety was present for all who came to see me (and yes, I did prime that as I mentioned it when I explained what Spiritual Direction was). Anxiety seemed to arise where following Christian principles

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who experiences anxiety and would like to speak to me to sign up if they wanted to. I had a sense that during all this activity there were some who would be experiencing anxiety and may have no place to go with that.

<sup>7</sup> This paper draws on literature, 6 case studies from spiritual direction sessions I held with young adults, and one direction transcript. I also conducted one semi-structured interview from the perspective of an active youth leader. I approached this paper as an observer rather than a researcher – the themes I've noted are not intended for drawing any particular conclusions but rather to stimulate on-going thought and discussion about directing younger people.

<sup>8</sup> See table: Appendix 1

seemed at odds with beliefs and values. It was also present where the desire to 'do good' all the time became overwhelming and perceived as an impossible task – 'doing good' appeared more about social expectations than an internal response.

I asked Becky, a young woman in her first-year training in a profession that she wasn't enjoying, whether she thought that God could love what she loved. She seemed uncertain at first, but a smile crossed her face when she imagined taking a year out of study volunteering abroad. "What would that be like?" I asked her, "I would love that", she said without hesitation.

When we talked about the anxiety she experienced when she knew she needed to study, I asked her whether she thought that the anxiety had any kind of message for her. "Um....it's telling me I need to study?" I wondered whether it really was, could there be something else underneath the anxiety? She paused for a moment and considered this – perhaps procrastination wasn't the problem?

Further direction could help to unpack whether there could be a dissonance between her internal voice and external expectations, helping to integrate the two. For that session though, it was enough to wonder about the possibility.

#### *External influence: Christian teaching*

Another common theme I found was the influence of Christian teaching<sup>9</sup> and peer Christian beliefs.

Abbie clearly articulated that she wanted to be 'integrated'. On asking her what that meant she explained it as a dissonance she was having with some Christian theology and her current reality. She often experienced feelings of guilt about not measuring up, not doing enough, not evangelizing enough and feeling overwhelmed. Christian training she'd had in the past reinforced feelings of guilt and the fact that her values were often at odds with what she was being taught. For example, she perceived it as culturally disrespectful to try and evangelise people who were happy with their faith and their cultural expressions of that faith. Her whole orientation during our session seemed to be "is it ok to question?" "Am I losing my faith if I disagree with what I've been taught?"

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<sup>9</sup> I would describe the kind of teaching this particular group of young people receive as evangelical: 'emphasizing salvation by faith in the atoning death of Jesus Christ through personal conversion, the authority of Scripture, and the importance of preaching as contrasted with ritual' <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/evangelical>  
Retrieved 22/9/2018

These questions are typical of a transitioning faith style where searching and questioning, doubt and critique becomes prevalent. Similar to Fowler's (1995)<sup>10</sup> 'stages of faith' transitioning is described as the *Individuative-Reflective stage*, often begun in young adulthood, when people start seeing outside the box and realizing that there are other 'boxes'. This stage can be hard to navigate and wise guides are so necessary for support and encouragement during transition.

Abbie seemed to have had little opportunity to voice doubts and fears – where actually these points of 'tension' were the very places she could be met by grace and go deeper into faith. Providing space for those in transitioning faith can give people like Abbie hope that their faith may be undergoing change, but they are not 'losing it'.

#### *External influence: peer group*

Other Christians in one's peer groups naturally has a degree of influence in many of these young people's lives, as peer groups have influence in any other young adult cohort. What may perhaps be a different slant on this influence is the pressure that comes with faith traditions that emphasise the importance of shared belief and implied consensus about anything from how to pray to who one should or shouldn't form relationships with. Katie came with such a relational dilemma. Bothered by the 'quick judgements' of friends and easy answers – she wanted to explore with me whether relationships could be viewed in 'another way'. I asked her how she thought that God may view this particular friend – she immediately said "God's child", and I left her some space to sit with what she'd said for a while. Katie was noticing that she could "focus on internal authority of self-understanding, experience and self-truth"<sup>11</sup> and allow other voices to quieten.

#### *Leadership and self-care*

When I asked Jess, a leader in her church, if vulnerability was OK for her, she started to cry and said she hated anyone to know she was feeling vulnerable. She also admitted that she avoided pain as much as possible – a bubbly extravert she would surround herself with people and activity, not knowing when to stop. The culture of 'doing' and busyness', so prevalent in society also wings its way into faith communities, providing little stillness and solace for tired souls. Jess was one who seemed particularly relieved at the quiet space she was invited to be in. My wondering was that her soul knew what it was

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<sup>10</sup> (Retrieved from <http://www.psychologycharts.com/james-fowler-stages-of-faith.html> 23/9/2018).

<sup>11</sup> See Appendix 1 – Transitioning Faith column.

longing for and considered it a safe place to make an appearance. Helping young directees to acknowledge their whole story, the dark and the light, the hope and the despair is integral to their growth and indeed their health, particularly if they perceive a calling to ministry.

Wondering how others experienced these challenges in leadership, I interviewed another youth leader to give me some insight. I found that Dan expressed a mature understanding of self-care:

*“It was realizing that taking care of myself is not a bad thing. One way that God made me really aware about that is the second greatest commandment to love each other as you love yourself, but then God in reflection showed me that if you don’t love yourself as much, how much can you give out to others? You are not going to fill up a tank like a quarter of the way and then expect to get from Wellington to Auckland. You need to fill it up all the way and take care of it the whole entire time you’re getting there”.*

Another characteristic of this young man was that he’d found out that he liked time alone with God. This surprised him as he described himself as the ‘extravert of extraverts’, however he had realized the value of solitude as time to strengthen his relationship with God and ‘fill up the tank’ at the same time.

He also showed a healthy respect for his own identity and an ability to ‘check’ external influences – he knew what to listen to and what to ignore or even challenge. When I asked him about some of the assumptions older adults may hold about young people he says:

*“I understand and I appreciate the concern over our generation, and I appreciate all that you guys do for us as well. But if you guys are saying that we’re the future, stop holding onto the mantle and let us wear it for a bit. Don’t try to force it back either. If we can wear the mantle from the get-go, cool beads, and if we’re struggling with it, take it off us. But it’s like don’t take our opportunities away from us because you’re threatened, I don’t understand that”.*

Young adults are often in an intense stage of finding out who they are and what their motivations and passions are. Spiritual Directors can help them in this self-discovery. Both Jess and Dan had explored the Enneagram to some degree and exhibited brave self-awareness and interest in further exploration.

Young adults often desire to lead their own processes but are also grateful for someone to walk alongside them while they navigate unknown terrain. As Kavar (2015) blogs, “Millennials want to know that we are people on a journey just like they are. We have an opportunity to make a connection with them when we share authentically from our own experience... (they) don’t want to know how to pray, practice, or believe. They are interested in how prayer, spiritual practice, and belief are part of an individual’s life”.



### *Concluding Reflections*

This explorative paper will hopefully spark further discussion<sup>12</sup> and reflection for Spiritual Directors – there is so much possibility for service to this age group.

It was helpful to remind myself while directing these young adults, that obedience to authority figures that love you and you love back, can often translate as obedience to God as well. Does God want what I want? Are my desires and longings OK to have? Or actually – isn't learning how to be a grown up doing what is sensible? Learning how to discern is critical for spiritual growth and making healthy life decisions – but sadly it seems common to get boxed in too early in life.

As their faith styles were showing signs of transitioning – the need seemed to be for someone to encourage and legitimate their personal exploration. Clearing the space to be present to a younger person requires some honest self-reflection. What we may first need to consider is the nature of our assumptions about young people to gauge whether our efforts may harm or heal. Assumptions shape our perceptions (Hart, 2005) and my role was to be a safe person for the questions and stories to emerge avoiding 'playing the expert'.

All these young women were concerned to varying degrees with discernment questions about careers/vocations, relationships and 'God's will' for their lives. All of them expressed some degree of uncertainty about the future and a desire to have more clarity about next steps. The uncertainty ranged from mild wondering to expressing their physical symptoms brought on by stress. As directors there is much scope to walk alongside young people as they discern, recognizing the anxiety that often surrounds decision making. This could develop over time from spiritual direction being a 'legitimation' space for their experiences through to more of a 'co-discernment' space.

External influences seem so prevalent for this age group, and contemplative practices are useful for going inward and helping to integrate what can often seem like opposing forces. There is much scope for future study to explore the potential for contemplative spirituality and practice to sustain young people and give them life-long tools for hope in their spiritual journey. There is also potential for

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<sup>12</sup> questions for further discussion:

What kinds of religious participation enhances spiritual growth and what suppresses it?  
 What may be underneath anxiety and how can we be wise guides for those experiencing it?  
 How can we provide space for young people to experience moments of wonder, peace and hope?  
 How do we work with the Spirit already at work in young people's lives without making assumptions?

Spiritual Direction being more intentionally offered to young adults, particularly as they transition in their faith and may be experiencing anxiety or mental distress. This requires Directors to perhaps also push beyond their comfortable places and open to opportunities where they can interact with young adults and offer service to ones who long for safe shores to rest their souls for a while.

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## APPENDIX 1

## Styles of Expressing Faith

Conventional Faith Expression	Transitioning	Post-Conventional Faith Expression
Focus on a black and white, right and wrong faith	Focus on the greys of faith and life	Focus on all shades of faith and life
Dependence	Independence	Interdependence
Answers accepted	Searching and questioning, doubt and critique	Understanding and relishing of mystery, paradox and wonder
Primary sense of relationship with God is hierarchical	Primary sense of God is relational	Primary sense of relationship with God is intimate
Socially constructed identity and roles	Formation of self-identity and roles	Giving of self for others
Want someone to lean on – e.g., a mentor or discipler	Want someone to encourage and legitimate their personal exploration – e.g., facilitator or sponsor	Want a co-discerner of God's will and leading – e.g., a spiritual director
Focus on external authority of leaders, the Bible and my community of faith	Focus on internal authority of self-understanding, experience and self-truth	Focus on integration of internal and external authorities of faith
The Bible, faith community or leaders are the authors-of-my-faith and life. A need to listen to the external voice(s)	I am the author-of-my-faith-and life. A need to listen to the internal voice(s)	The Spirit of God within me is the author-of-my-faith and life. A need to integrate external and internal voices
Status quo confirmed	Status quo challenged	Status quo integrated into larger canvas
What and how?	Why?	What is my contribution?
Specific personal examples	Hearing and telling our own stories	Working with metaphor, art and poetry

This table is reprinted from an article by Alan Jamieson in the Spirited Exchanges newsletter. Extracted from [www.spiritedexchanges.org.nz](http://www.spiritedexchanges.org.nz)

## APPENDIX 2

### Semi-structured interview

Opening statement:

This interview is about gaining understanding about the spiritual growth of young people, what they are attracted to and want, and what they may need to encourage them in their faith journeys. I am completing a course in spiritual formation through SGM, and so my particular interest is in how young people *experience* faith and their concept of God. This is very different from knowing about God mainly through cognitive understanding or what they are taught. So for next half an hour or so I will ask you questions based on your story of experiencing God and how that impacts your relationship with others.

Semi-structured interview questions:

1. Please tell me a little bit about what faith means to you?
2. Is this faith something you feel like you've always had somehow, or is more recent? Please explain
3. In times when you have felt close to God, what made the difference for you? (e.g., another person's help, an event, a quiet time?)
4. An example of how God may speak to us is often quoted as a 'still, quiet voice'. How do you feel about silence or quiet? Is it something you seek out?
5. I understand that you lead others, not much younger than yourself – how were you drawn to this ministry?
6. In what ways are you 'fueled up' and encouraged in your work with young people?
7. Do you have a sense about what some of the young people may need to encourage their spiritual growth?
8. Is there anything you long for in your spiritual life that's different from what you experience now?
9. Is there anything on your heart that you feel is your gift to bring others?
10. What kind of support do you want so you can do or be this?
11. What do you think are some of the main assumptions that older adults hold about young people?
12. Do you have any ideas about how to change these assumptions?
13. What do you want to tell older adults about your reality?

## APPENDIX 3

### Ideas for contemplative activities with young people

- Rivers and Robots – He leads me beside still waters meditation (Spotify)
- Young Adults examen prayer: <https://www.pray-as-you-go.org/home/>
- Collaging where they notice light and life and what may be challenging in their lives. This practice encourages a space for youth to express things they find difficult to speak about. As the Student mental health survey pointed out, most try and deal with problems on their own – art can be a way to put things ‘out there’ rather than leaving things to swirl around in their minds. It can also help them to notice that there are good things happening even in the midst of difficulties.
- ‘Checking in’ whenever meeting in a small group ‘high points, low points and ‘how is your sense of beloved-ness going?’
- Silence – introduce this gradually, a few minutes at first and then build it up to longer periods of times. As keeping still can also be hard when people are not used to it, have tactile things available for youth to hold onto to anchor themselves in the moment. These could be traditional objects like ‘holding crosses’ or prayer beads, but also could be playdoh or lego. Once they have been practicing silence for some time, it might be appropriate to try silence without the objects.
- Retreats: (e.g., for youth leaders) Providing space and time to refuel and re-connect.
- Pilgrimage – for example sacred sites within NZ. The Anglican church takes students on pilgrimage once a year. This can be a powerful way of re-connecting youth to New Zealand’s story and history – particularly encouraging engagement with our bi-cultural story.
- Nature: Tapping into a sense of awe can reconnect us to a sense of the sacred and the divine in everything. It can also provide relief from busyness and mental distress. E.g., see “The Awe walk” [https://ggia.berkeley.edu/practice/awe\\_walk](https://ggia.berkeley.edu/practice/awe_walk)

**Postscript****Facebook post for young adult's camp:**

*We are blessed this year to have two awesome people offering Spiritual Direction! :-*

*From them - "If your spiritual life is bringing up weird and wonderful wonderings and questions, or you want to notice more and respond to what God may be showing you.... or it's all one hazy fog of confusion- getting some spiritual direction might be helpful for you. Come and experience non-judgmental listening and some space to listen to your own seeking heart."*

*You can sign up to spend time with Leonie Hall and/or Andy Bank when you get here!*

