

Becoming a Directee

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This special interest project starts with a disclaimer; a warning. It may contain language offensive to some people. If you are allergic to words like marketing, recruitment campaign or self-promotion do not read on.

Or, maybe that's just helped to heighten your interest.

We live in a world that is marketed to us. We filter or 'like' things that grab our attention. They come as images, movies and as carefully loaded words. Words transmit a message, but interpretation is always with the receiver; what we say, and what is heard are not necessarily the same thing. How a 'receiver', hearing the words 'spiritual direction' for the first time, understands the concept, the practice, is completely dependent on their previous experience of 'spiritual' and 'direction'.

The power of these words, and how they represent soul-work, is core business in spiritual direction. We, like all enterprises, practices, and professions, have our own unique language and practices that have become so familiar over time we can become unaware of how our language is interpreted by the receiver. It's easy to forget what jargon is industry specific, regardless of what industry that we find ourselves immersed in. We in spiritual direction have our own language we are familiar with; invitation, consolation, discernment, *direction*. However, like driving a new route home, it may be useful to take a step back to see what we do with new eyes.

As spiritual directors, we get to sit in both directive seats; we are one day a director, watching God being revealed within a life in front of us. The next day, we sit in the other seat, searching inwardly to find the love of God revealed in us, alongside a trusted spiritual companion. The roles are distinct, both in the service of God, and mostly we flip between them with ease. We know the space, the language, the process, and after a while, forget that others may not.

Fr Joseph Tetlow, a seasoned director of five decades in spiritual direction, views this space as two disciples meeting in the presence of God. Although it is an asymmetrical relationship, with an equal or greater experienced person and one who wants to come closer to God, we both come as children to the same heavenly Father¹. We are comfortable in this directive space, because of experience and have learnt to focus our skills and practice. Now we perhaps wonder what our lives would be like without this practice, but there was once a time we wondered if it would even be of benefit to our lives.

The purpose of this enquiry is to hold that early space and think like a beginner, to revisit the important basic questions - why and how do people seek out spiritual direction? Linked with that, how can I prepare to be a directee? How can we as Directors support potential companions to move into this space, that we all value deeply?

Firstly, how we find our way into this space. Spiritual direction is a calling for those who take the seat of the director; that is always true. We hold the space, God calls us and the Holy Spirit does the directing. Likewise, it is God who draws people to the directee seat as well; God who

¹ Tetlow, Joseph A. *Finding Spiritual Direction*, chapter 1 (Audible).

opens the doors to people who are ready. Do we have any part in gathering and setting up directees to flourish, or are we leaving all the work up to God? Vic Francis, in his Special Interest Project,² quotes Brian Tallman, who points out the dichotomy of leaving it all to God, and doing nothing ourselves; or doing it all ourselves, with God having a minor part to play.³ Perhaps a genuine partnership needs to be formed. Vic Francis surveyed a small group of established spiritual directors, and found overwhelmingly that word of mouth was used for gathering new directees. This channel of connecting with a director (without any 'advertising' from the director) leans heavily on who we know, and more often than not, we are finding people not too far from our own social circles; those like us.

It's well established that church attendance in the West is in decline with increasing numbers of people who now report no religious affiliation at all. In the USA in 2007, about 16% of the population reported no religious identity and that percentage had grown to around 20% in 2020, in just over a decade.⁴

Growth within the Western church setting during this time has also shown a shift away from mainstream and Protestant congregations to super-sized churches, described as 'mega-', where worship is music, the focus is receptive not participation, and leadership is top-down. They utilise state-of-the-art technology, modern language and offer new ways of presenting the gospel through video and social media. The focus, with great success, connects with contemporary culture. While this subset of the body of Christ is an evolution within the stream of Christian community in style and culture, it has not tended to bring church language (jargon), nor age-old formation practices with them. These communities have been incredibly successful building a youthful experience for a modern world. Sadly, of late, with reports of leadership issues and abuse, the 'target market' appears to be moving away as fast as it walked in. During the pandemic of the past few years, the requirement for all public gatherings to be closed down, including churches, has also had an impact on church communities. Post-pandemic reports (albeit early) are suggesting that numbers are not returning to in-house services to the same extent as pre-pandemic.⁵ (A post-pandemic study in 2022 of the Episcopalian church in the US reported a 35% decline in regular attendance from 2020.)⁶

It seems to be a growing trend; although people are wanting a spiritual life, many are disenchanted with traditional and Megachurch movements, and the impact of church leadership, and see the post-pandemic environment as a chance to reappraise their spiritual

²Link to SIP, Vic Francis :

https://static1.squarespace.com/static/61bc03f62de2a218da912840/t/61e9ee16d64c3441fc32d8d3/1642720793125/vic_francis_developing_a_spiritual_direction_practice.pdf

³ Bruce Tallman, quoted by Vic Francis : Developing A Spiritual Direction Practice, SIP paper, p3.

⁴ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/christianity-us-shrinking-pew-research/> (reported CBS news, 14 september 2022).

⁵ <https://research.lifeway.com/2022/06/03/some-previous-churchgoers-are-still-missing-post-covid/>

⁶ From 'Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations: Innovation amidst and beyond Covid-19' as reported in the Church Times (02 December 2022).

connections. The majority of leavers are moving out of faith communities altogether and identifying as 'nothing in particular'.⁷

In his book, 'The Invisible Church', Steve Aisthorpe wrestles with what he finds to be an 'irreconcilable contradiction', that is, people who leave the church but continue to espouse a Christian faith as the mainspring of their lives.⁸ Alan Jamieson calls it a Churchless Faith.⁹ It seems that there is a trend of people who grow disenchanted with church but want to live out their Christian faith without any ongoing relationship with a Christian congregation as central to their faith.¹⁰ Jamieson goes on to say that the vast majority of those whom he interviewed did not leave the church suddenly but over a protracted period of time.¹¹ This phenomenon, 'deconstruction',¹² has become a catch-cry of people leaving church in notable numbers.

We (spiritual directors) have an ideal opportunity for 'marketing', educating or even just waving a hand to get attention, in the here and now, with this sector of discontented church leavers. Paul Jones, in the Art of Spiritual Direction, goes as far to say that spiritual direction will be the basis for a revived church, *'A renewed church needs to be built on spiritually directed persons; such persons, in turn, will emerge from a church restructured by and for spiritual direction.'*¹³

This is not the forum for examining how to interact with these phenomena, but to perhaps point out that there are well-understood patterns for spirituality growth and development - stages of spiritual growth identified by a number of writers, beginning with Fowler¹⁴, through to most recently Brian McLaren - an author associated with the post-modern church movement.¹⁵ Spiritual growth stages have identifiable touchpoints that Christians who start to deeply examine their faith, their sense of belonging, will often transition through transformationally. We know within any congregation there will be people who are moving through these phases yet might be part of a church culture without the resources to direct them to a safe space for complex and difficult questions; so they leave. We also know that the spiritual direction space is an excellent place to hold these people, if only they knew where to head. If we know this to be true, and can reach people within congregations, offering the support - it may be the ambulance at the top of the cliff.

How to engage with an identified group is the very quandary that any consumer-orientated business faces. How to market your brand, to educate people who would benefit from what you have to offer. However, there is a reluctance from the spiritual direction community to think about 'marketing'. Vic Francis' paper points touches on the mindset we have in spiritual

⁷ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/08/08/why-americas-nones-dont-identify-with-a-religion/>

⁸ Aisthorpe, Steve. The Invisible Church, p 8.

⁹ Book is : Alan Jamieson, A Churchless Faith, London : SPCK, 2002.

¹⁰ Steve Aisthorpe, The Invisible Church, p9.

¹¹ Alan Jamieson, A Churchless Faith, p 32.

¹² Ibid, p 69.

¹³ W. Paul Jones, The Art of Spiritual Direction, p 234.

¹⁴ Alan Jamieson, A Churchless Faith, p 108.

¹⁵ Book is: Brian McLaren, Faith after Doubt, Hodder & Stoughton : London, 2021.

direction, *'while 'aggressive marketing' is inappropriate, growing a practice does involve some proactivity on behalf of directors'*¹⁶. This is a holy space, and business models appear not to fit. Marketing might appear incongruous with spirituality, but megachurches have used it successfully for evangelism and information dissemination to engage with the modern world. Websites, Instagram, live-streams and other media information dissemination modes are successful, contemporary ways to communicate¹⁷.

There is a parallel in the health industry where mass communication has positively influenced longevity outcomes. Today, people are acutely aware of lifestyle practices with high morbidity rates, and morbidity numbers have successfully reduced using such methods.¹⁸ Success in raising awareness of the effects of smoking, heart health, diabetes, cancer awareness, and more recently protecting our nation from a pandemic, have had very positive lifestyle and longevity results across the general population. As a result of many such health campaigns, people are now aware of the consequences of poor lifestyle choices they didn't know were compromising their lives and have been given skills to overcome negative life patterns. Over time it has given rise to a holistic health and wellness movement, to the benefit of many. If it is valuable for increasing positive physical health, perhaps we shouldn't overlook it for positive spiritual health as well.

The use of marketing is not always for capital gain if the focus is on positive outcomes for the end user. While a small, measured campaign, focusing on information and how to engage in spiritual direction, might appear to benefit a director, it is of equal (arguably more) benefit to a soul who doesn't know where to go with spiritual desolation. A targeted awareness campaign to connect people who are sitting in churches struggling with faith with the spiritual practice of direction, might just be the ambulance station at the cliff top.

How this is carried out, however, is crucial. The mega-movement has mastered marketing with success, using focused marketing plans and plain language, reaching people that have found faith as a result. They have communications teams dedicated to just that. Thinking like a directee who knows nothing about spiritual direction, and working out how they could find information, revisiting our own first experiences, could be the take home lesson from this contracting section of the church.

If the first question was how to guide people into this space, the second question follows, how to educate once aware of the practice ... how to become a directee? The organic approach is once again – just show up. If God has called us to the space, we will find a spiritual director with time in their calendar and learn as the sessions go forward. The director is the teacher.

Again, while it is true there are no prerequisites required to sit in the directee chair, much has been assumed. There are great opportunities for pre-learning that will both help the director and offer the directee the best of the experience possible. Things that could be offered to a complete novice to enhance the experience, and 'sell' the concept ahead of time with benefits

¹⁶ Vic Francis, *Developing A Spiritual Direction Practice*, SIP paper, p5.

¹⁷ there are many examples of this on Instagram such as #arisechurch, #hillsong etc.

¹⁸ <https://academic.oup.com/her/article/11/1/97/663944>

for the directee, and the director. (This is the first module we contemplate in the Spiritual Growth Ministries spiritual direction training, as are the resources).

Emily Freeman, a spiritual director with an Instagram account with 118,000 followers, conducted a survey for a podcast she was about to produce around 'spiritual direction for beginners'.¹⁹ She received hundreds of responses that settled into three main areas: what is spiritual direction, how does it differ from ... (counselling/mentoring/bible study/prayer partnership) and thirdly, how to find one. In the New Zealand setting, the third question is the easiest, with links on the SGM.org.nz and the ACSD.org.nz websites. The other two questions form a good indication of what an uninitiated person would gain from knowing in order to become a directee. Added to that, from the selection of books and websites explored as part of this enquiry, a simple outline of what may happen in a session, and the benefits of establishing a long-term holy relationship like spiritual direction, are the basic information points a prospective directee would find useful.

What then, are the questions we should be mindful of when creating education and informative material to support people in finding their way into spiritual direction? There are many books written about spiritual direction with the aim of becoming a director, but not so many about sitting in the other seat. What follows is a summary of thoughts from a few directors who have thought back to a starting out on a directee journey – a brief summary of points to consider.

What is spiritual direction? This question seems to spark a minor philosophical discussion from all authors. It is generally agreed that the descriptor is not accurate to what the formation practice is, but it carries history. Mabry concludes there is not one answer, 'and any answer would be incomplete.'²⁰ Many other terms are used, as every director knows - companion, midwife (Guenther), soul friend (Leech); Spiritual Accompaniment is one on the rise. It is foundational as directors that we have worked through our own relationship to the terminology, and this cannot be overestimated.

The point is that this is not a question with a simple answer but is an evolving response as we develop as directors and our own unique practice. Developing our 'elevator pitch' (a twenty-second conversational story), or opening line, is vital to this whole process. Interestingly, by typing 'what is spiritual direction?' into a Google search, a stunning 'about 120,000,000 results' pop up.²¹ Every director will have a slightly different approach, which needs to be thought through into a conversational soundbite from the outset of a new directee relationship, and will morph depending on the person's prior understanding.

Ball suggests a good question to turn the thinking back for a potential directee is, what am I looking for?²² There will be as many answers to this question as there are directees, and it helps to set things up as they will go forward, creating a space for self-inquiry; it focuses the

¹⁹ <https://emilypfreeman.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/The-Next-Right-Thing-Ep.-167.pdf> p2 transcript

²⁰ Mabry, Starting Spiritual Direction. p 1

²¹ Try it! :)

²² Peter Ball, Introducing Spiritual Direction. p13

journey, and is perhaps more useful than the 'what is?' question. It might be a wordless call from the spirit, or something more practical and situational. Ball says many 'find their faith not so much in clearly defined answers but rather being faithful to the quest for understanding.'²³

What can I expect? Again, the point of mentioning this here is that it is unique to every director, but something that a prospective directee would be curious to know, Therefore, a director should have an answer ready, and it should be included in any material produced to complement our practice.

What are the benefits? Once we understand the focus is not so much a two-way conversation between people but with God, nor is it about a fixing a problem but a space devoted to the spiritual development of us as a directee, grace begins. This is the way that spiritual direction is unique and the gifts we can receive are many. This is a place where spiritual direction deviates from all the other practices of what Emily Freeman calls soul-work (counselling/mentoring, etc) and serves as a place to settle on when offering spiritual direction to a prospective directee. It takes some time however, to understand this; we are entering holy ground. It is a good thing to be included in pre-direction session information as something that we as directors have thought through from our own unique practice. It's an opportunity to offer our story, while illustrating the answer to this question.

This special interest project started with a disclaimer and ends with a note of hope. There is a decline noted across churches in the West, yet many leavers indicate they are still on a spiritual quest. Spiritual direction is an answer to this call. Spiritual direction appears to be experiencing a rejuvenation within the body of Christ worldwide, and there are practitioners, such as Mabry and Jones, who suggest spiritual direction may play a major role within that revival.

However, there is a solid block of believers who have no experience of this holy space and its potential to allow God to transform our souls. We as directors need to be mindful of that when thinking about new people entering the world of spiritual direction; to consider simple things that may act as barriers - language and expectations being the most obvious. With conscious effort, we must mindfully engage to reach out, and come alongside, drawing people to the mysterious Presence of the One we call God.

²³ Ibid, p14

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