

# Spiritual Direction and Companying in Sacred Spaces

By Jutta Chisholm, January 2021



*Jutta Chisholm, The bottom gate, Southern Star Abbey, Kopua. 2020*

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## Introduction

The inspiration for this essay came about after a journey up Te Awa Tupua (the Whanganui river). I felt a very tangible spiritual connection from being in several sacred sites on this trip, and I asked myself what it might be like to experience spiritual direction in those places. Would it bring up thoughts and feelings from deep within that I had not yet connected to? It was this curiosity that prompted me to look more closely at the kinds of spaces spiritual direction takes place in, and why. Most spiritual directors practice spiritual direction in a room or office suitably arranged for the purpose: welcoming, hospitable and quiet.<sup>1</sup> I don't advocate doing away with this fundamental idea, but it is still the director's space and the directee may not feel fully at ease, no matter what preparations may have been done. So I wanted to explore whether or not using other places and spaces might add another dimension to the work of spiritual direction. I decided to focus my research on local directors in order to discover first-hand the sorts of spaces they might use, and the circumstances around choosing them. I did this by way of a questionnaire and several face to face interviews<sup>2</sup>. It is through their experiences, mingled with my own, that I hope to answer how a more purposeful use of spaces might benefit spiritual direction.

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<sup>1</sup> Clergy and chaplains do provide spiritual direction at bedsides, in hospitals, aged care facilities and so on. This tends to be out of necessity. I wish to distinguish those instances from ones where the directee has a choice of location and the director intentionally asks if they would like to choose one.

<sup>2</sup> See appendix

## Spiritual spaces

I experience spiritual spaces as the kinds of places where I am able to feel most alive to the presence of the Holy Spirit. Spiritual spaces have therefore played a vital role in deepening my relationship with God. I have noticed, for example, that I am able to contemplate more easily when I am walking in the bush than when I am sitting inside my house. There is something about my walking in nature that helps me to turn the dial from my analytical headspace and tune into my spiritual frequency. This is no coincidence, because, as Hildegard von Bingen describes, ‘the natural world is our *’source of life [which] like all creation [is] an overflowing of God’s light and love.’*<sup>3</sup> I believe as a consequence, when I am walking in the bush, being in my spiritual space, I feel more open to this ‘overflow of light and love’, and therefore more connected to God. I soon discovered I was not alone in this experience, as this excerpt from an interview I conducted on spiritual spaces highlights: *“Before I was a Christian, I would walk in the hills around Littan where I lived. I went there to be with God. It is where I found God and perceived God. I would say, ‘I am going to talk to God, and I would go there to talk to God, to be with God, and so if I needed to be with God then I went to those thin places.’”*<sup>4</sup>

The term ‘thin place’ dates back to Celtic times and describes a place

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<sup>3</sup> Spiritual Growth Ministries; *Creativity and Spirituality workshop*,handout, Kohanga Ako Year 2, 2020. excerpt.

<sup>4</sup> Chisholm Jutta; *Interview on Sacred Spaces* with the Rt. Rev. Dr. Eleanor Sanderson, Assistant Bishop of Wellington, 23 September 2020, excerpt.

where ‘the membrane between this world and the other world, between the material and spiritual, dissolves.’<sup>5</sup> Indeed for some, being in nature, going “into [their] *outdoor cathedral*,”<sup>6</sup> may be the primary way they connect to God. In the Bible, Genesis recounts the birth of the world made sacred with ‘God’s Spirit hovering over the waters.’<sup>7</sup> It paints a divine image of the Spirit connecting the creator with the created. This dynamic was described in terms of ‘energy’ by one of my directees, and it made me wonder what spiritual direction might look like if she was in a space where she felt immersed in its ‘flow’? I promoted the idea and she agreed with excitement, choosing the hills above where she lives. “*The energy [she explained] is much better here. I can drop down into my heart space more easily. In a room you can feel quite interviewy, with my turn, your turn, but up here in nature we are just talking. It’s a more felt experience. I can say things straight from the heart because I’m not so aware of the pressure of feeling the need to talk and fill the empty spaces.*”<sup>8</sup> This feeling of ease created a wonderful sense of interpathy on the walk, as we connected to nature, each other and the spiritual ‘energy’ surrounding us. It felt as if the bush lined path was holy ground, and the chanting rhythm of our steps somehow sanctified, maybe because it was

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<sup>5</sup> Sheldrake Philip; *Living Between Worlds; Place and Journey in Celtic Spirituality*, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1955, 1988, p.7

<sup>6</sup> Chisholm Jutta; *Special Interest Project, Companying in Sacred spaces Questionnaire for Spiritual Directors*, July 2020, excerpt from directors response. (name withheld)

<sup>7</sup> R.S.V Genesis 1; ‘and the Spirit (b) of God was moving over the face of the waters’. (paraphrased)

<sup>8</sup> Ibid; *Chisholm Jutta*; Questionnaire 2020

also pouring with rain! I believe that our agreed intent on the outset, to make this a spiritual walk, contributed to setting it apart from an ordinary bush walk. The result was that for the first time in our one and half years in spiritual direction together, my directee instinctively offered to pray for me out loud. Something she had never felt drawn to doing, and I sensed because she had owned the experience entirely, she was able to open up to God in this new way. We have since arranged to meet in a variety of settings, the bush, the shore, her home and my space, *“not wanting to give up meeting there altogether.”*<sup>9</sup>



Jutta Chisholm, Interpathy, Days Bay Eastbourne, 2020

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid; Chisholm Jutta; *Questionnaire* 2020

## Different spaces

Meeting in spaces which foster a good relationship is all important for building the on-going companionship desirable in spiritual direction. For some however the customary meeting in an enclosed room with facing chairs and unfamiliar images may not be ideal. Instead such spaces may give rise consciously or subconsciously to uncomfortable, even anxious feelings. This may end in their remaining spiritually closed off and even alienated. In such cases open sharing relationships are difficult to form. Although hospitality that 'offers a surplus of warmth'<sup>10</sup> can satisfactorily welcome and put most directees at ease, this is not always sufficient for some. I believe there are those who are unable to feel fully accepted in certain spaces, because they have felt set apart from the very start. This could be because of their religious traditions, differences of expression through gender or culture, or personal and psychological struggles. This project at the very least seeks to bring about an awareness of how spaces can attract or repel those seeking spiritual direction, and how offering alternatives could be important for facilitating acceptance and inclusion. An example of this could be the director visiting a directee's home, where the power dynamic is reversed - with the director now being the invited guest. This mirrors Jesus' own ministry centered on meeting people where they are at in their own lives. So what kinds of spaces are directors making available for their directees? The responses to my

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<sup>10</sup> Barry William & Connolly William; *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1981) p.126

questionnaire showed that there are some more commonly used spaces than others. These are: homes (both the director's and directee's), walks outside in the bush and private grounds such as retreat camps, river trails and gardens, chapels or churches, gardens, cafes, and workspaces. For the purposes of this project I chose to omit cafes and workspaces, as although they can work as useful meeting spaces for primary contact, or when time is limited, they are considered practical rather than spiritual spaces by most people.

### **The Director's space**

The survey confirmed that for most, spiritual direction takes place, 'in the safe space that has been created by the director, [so he/she can be] totally committed, attentive only to the welfare of the guest.'<sup>11</sup>

Accordingly, an assurance that the space is free of unforeseen distractions remains a key consideration. Consequently, many directors prefer receiving directees in their purposefully arranged space, where there is more control over the environment, and they can set clear boundaries.

This includes their ability to keep better time, so the session doesn't 'drift', and to make sure the location is accessible, private and safe. "*For myself (one director comments), either receiving or giving, I need*

*absolute privacy, and have thought others had the same need.*"<sup>12</sup> Indeed

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<sup>11</sup> Guenther Margaret; *Holy Listening, The Art of Spiritual Direction*, Darton, Longman, Todd LTD. 1992,1994,1996, 1998, p.15

<sup>12</sup> Ibid: Chisholm Jutta; *Questionnaire 2020*



most directors feel that one of the significant advantages of meeting in their space is that it can be *“made to feel safe and comfortable for both [themselves and their directees.]”*<sup>13</sup> The familiarity of the space can also provide a sense of continuity and ownership. By welcoming directees back each time *“into a space set aside for them,”*<sup>14</sup> there is a sense that they are co-creating the space, and therefore they give it preference over alternatives. However this isn't always the case: one director shared that some of their directees *“barely notice a room at all, and do not place high value on it,”*<sup>15</sup> and that for them spiritual direction is *“a time to go deep within rather than engage with the environment.”*<sup>16</sup> For some it is the space created by the journey itself, to and from the meeting, that they find significant. The often more than one hour drive is seen as a mini pilgrimage with *“travel offering a bridge for reflection-transition-reflection, before and after the session.”*<sup>17</sup>

### **The Directee's space**

With so many benefits to meeting in the director's space, what circumstances might persuade both givers and receivers of spiritual direction to consider other possibilities? For most the motivation stems

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid: Chisholm Jutta; *Questionnaire 2020*

<sup>14</sup> Ibid: Chisholm Jutta; *Questionnaire 2020*

<sup>15</sup> Ibid: Chisholm Jutta; *Questionnaire 2020*

<sup>16</sup> Ibid: Chisholm Jutta; *Questionnaire 2020*

<sup>17</sup> Ibid: Chisholm Jutta; *Questionnaire 2020*



from a *“mutual decision to do so, based on the practicalities of the circumstances at the time,”* i.e. travel distances, limited mobility and continuity. As one director describes it, *“I think she was not looking forward to changing director [so] I offered to go to her home and she leapt at the chance. She was surprised but grateful. I felt she didn’t feel she could even ask.”*<sup>18</sup> Which makes an important point, that as directors we may assume our directees are comfortable with only visiting **our** space, as in counselling, and because alternatives have not been raised, the concept never enters their thoughts. Interestingly during Covid, when people had no choice but to stay at home, reactions were split. There were those who felt decidedly uncomfortable with the scheduled on-line meetings, and chose not to participate, and those who embraced the new format with comfort and ease. *“I was struck by direction in lockdown where the directee chose the setting for a zoom session or facetime, it was really helpful, as it was their home, having a coffee etc, and even their dog checking it out, I think helpful.”*<sup>19</sup> Perhaps this speaks of a different demographic in tune with the digital age and more comfortable with feeling ‘at home’ in their space behind the screen or phone. Regardless, I believe we must be on the lookout for changes in society and embrace them by being open to new ways of doing things. It can only enhance spiritual direction going forward. I was excited reading a

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid: Chisholm Jutta; *Questionnaire 2020*

<sup>19</sup> Ibid: Chisholm Jutta; *Questionnaire 2020*

quote from Briege O’Hare challenging us to ‘... let go of a culture of certainty and embrace the wilderness of searching,<sup>20</sup> This requires embracing people where they are, in the spaces they live out their lives. Spaces such as homes where “we are affirming the incarnation of God with people where they are.”<sup>21</sup> Even though homes may sometimes lack some peace and order (“we were literally sitting in the midst of her transition”<sup>22</sup>), their authenticity can create spaces for real spiritual experiences. For some, being in their less formal, relatable spaces is akin to preferring a home over a hospital birth (to borrow from Magaret Guenther’s midwife analogy) .<sup>23</sup> Trusting the space and trusting the process, going hand in hand.



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<sup>20</sup> O’Hare Beige; *In Presence: An International Journal of Spiritual Direction*, Vol.10, No.2, June 2004, pp 35-36

<sup>21</sup> Ibid; Chisholm Jutta; *Interview Rt. Rev. Dr. Eleanor Sanderson 2020*

<sup>22</sup> Ibid; Chisholm Jutta; *Questionnaire 2020*

<sup>23</sup> Ibid; Guenther Margaret; Refers to Chapter 3.p.86

## Spaces of trust and inclusion

Trusting the space is a two way street. It requires an empathetic relationship, based on the mutuality of companionship and built on a foundation of understanding. Sometimes this requires moving out of our comfort zones and into the 'wilderness' of the seemingly mysterious and different. Embracing other cultures is such a place. Perhaps unknowingly as directors, we may assume our way is everyone's way. For example, something as natural to western culture as sitting across from one another in close eye contact, can be a sign of confrontation or disrespect in the Māori and Pacific communities.<sup>24</sup> Directors need to increase their awareness of other cultures and traditions and amend the way they might otherwise do things. This may comprise something as simple as the way the seats are arranged, so they are sitting next to as opposed to across from their directees. Moreover it stresses that directors need to do more than inform themselves, they need to include directees in the decision making process itself in order to 'bracket [their] preferred ways of knowing, and think as well as feel across the cultural boundary and enter their [directees] very different world of thought.'<sup>25</sup> For some this may prove quite a challenge. However I believe that with an attitude desiring more openness, and through practice, cultural divides can be crossed

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<sup>24</sup> [www.amitabhahospice.org](http://www.amitabhahospice.org); *Amitabha Hospice Service website*, Māori and Pacific Island Customs and Beliefs, excerpt

<sup>25</sup> Rakoczy Susan; *Responding to Difference: Challenges for Contemporary Spiritual Directors*, Quoted from SGM, 'working with difference' handout Kohanga Ako, term 2, 2020

and new relationships formed ‘full of wonder and growth.’<sup>26</sup> One directee shared his experience of *“working with Māori, who sadly are not front runners for spiritual direction. It’s important, especially the nature aspect ... our meeting came quite by chance. ‘Could we walk near the river?’ It changed everything. He was away with a new confidence and put his journey in terms of the river he belongs to.”*<sup>27</sup> The riverscape mirroring the directee’s inscape and embracing wairuatanga\*,<sup>28</sup> fundamental to Māori spirituality.

### **The body is a sacred space.**

The concept that our bodies are sacred sites is one that is not so readily embraced in western culture. Like our spirit, our body also *“needs to be soothed, to be set free, to be set alight, and helped to see.”*<sup>29</sup> This may sound more mystical and complex than it really is, because we do it naturally by expressing ourselves through song, dance, meditation, music, poetry, painting, gardening, cooking, etc. In spiritual direction we need to be open to fostering these activities. As one director shared, *“He was a Samoan and much more comfortable working in the garden. It was basically very helpful indeed. It built trust and freed him to share more,*

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid; Rakoczy Susan, Quoted

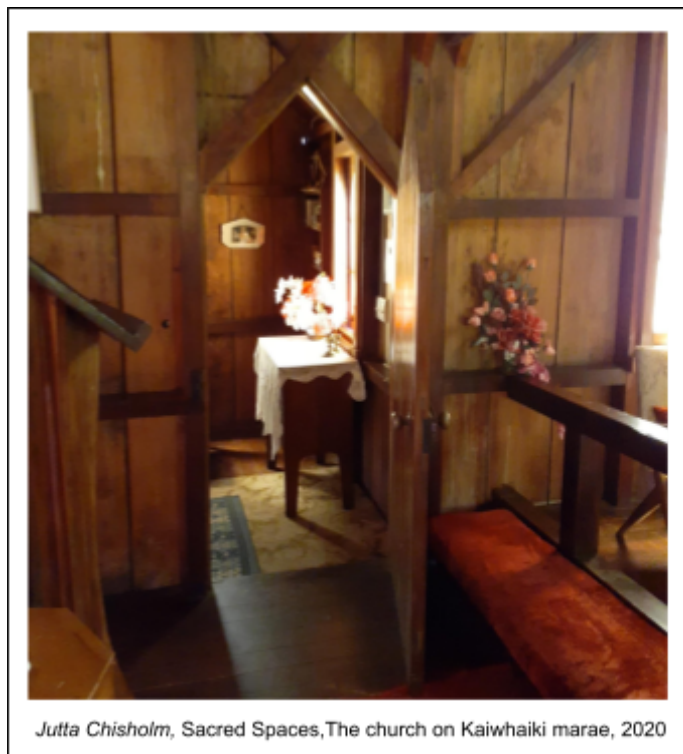
<sup>27</sup> Ibid; Chisholm Jutta; *Questionnaire 2020*

<sup>28</sup> **wairutanga\***, ‘literally meaning two waters, the spiritual and physical. Wairutanga recognises all aspects of Te Ao Māori could have an ever-present spiritual dimension which pervades all Māori values’; excerpt from [www.hekpu.ac.nz](http://www.hekpu.ac.nz)

<sup>29</sup> Ibid; Chisholm Jutta; *Interview Rt.Rev. Dr. Eleanor Sanderson 2020*

*and also with a mana and a new confidence.”<sup>30</sup> This may also have implications for young people who are “flexible with different settings [and those] ‘stuck’ on their spiritual journey,”<sup>31</sup> who are looking to discover less traditional ways of expressing themselves. Disenfranchised church leavers, and those suffering, may be another group looking for new gentler ways to meet and relate to God. An example of this is recalled by a director’s meeting with a young directee, “I noticed she was fidgeting in the direction space - she’d experienced significant trauma - so I asked if she’d prefer a walk instead. She took up the idea immediately. Essentially this was her choice not mine. I found that the shift in energy, going outside and moving, made her relax, and as we weren’t face to face, it seemed to help her communicate more easily.”*

<sup>32</sup> Sometimes something as uncomplicated as simply going outdoors can reap significant rewards.



Jutta Chisholm, Sacred Spaces, The church on Kaiwhaiki marae, 2020

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid; Chisholm Jutta; *Questionnaire 2020*

<sup>31</sup> Ibid; Chisholm Jutta; *Questionnaire 2020*

<sup>32</sup> Ibid; Chisholm Jutta; *Questionnaire 2020*

## Sacred spaces

I began this essay introducing spiritual spaces, so it is perhaps fitting that it should end on sacred spaces. To clarify, I believe spiritual spaces are the kinds of select places which draw each of us personally, through our own experience, into closer connection to God. Although there can be an overlap, sacred spaces are those which, regardless of our personal involvement, transmit a sacred resonance, and on happening upon them, we are drawn beyond our logical selves into their profound mystery. A director shares her experience of accompanying a directee in such a space as “*..being in the chapel was special, although it was known to my directee, it felt to me like neutral ground, and holy ground. Our conversation felt sacred, and I recall playing a piece of music and the sound wafting in the slightly echoey chapel space gave it a heightened sense of the sacred somehow.*”<sup>33</sup> Such spaces feel as if they are ‘breathing out’ the generations of prayers, laments and blessings of all who have gathered on their holy ground, bringing those within them to a place which transcends doctrine, tradition and culture and into what can best be described as a ‘felt’ sacred presence. One director, attending a tangi, was guided by the Spirit’s presence, and found that: “*I just started to weep and then I could hear the wailing behind me, and I started to keen\* and in every space the kuia\* would weep and cry, but I started it first; you see I wasn’t copying, because I didn’t know the story. It felt like*

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid; Chisholm Jutta; *Questionnaire 2020*

*the land was speaking through me, and I have no reference in my western culture to explain that.*"<sup>34</sup> In sacred spaces the Spirit draws us even more powerfully to respond to God's invitation, and helps explain why we come into spiritual direction more easily there. It is as if the Holy Spirit claims authority over those in attendance, and invites them to join her in the 'sacred song.'

## Conclusion

As spiritual directors we seek to walk alongside our directees as companions, meeting them where they are in their relationship with God, in the reality of their lives. I believe that by accompanying directees in **their** spiritually significant spaces, we are fulfilling this paradigm. In order to do this we need to become more aware of the kinds of spaces directees may need, so we are better able to minister to those seeking authentic personal experiences and real connections in spiritual direction. By exploring some of the first hand experiences of spiritual directors in this essay, I hope to have created some curiosity around directing in this way, and possibly added another useful tool to the spiritual director's kete.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid; Chisholm Jutta; *Interview Rt. Rev. Dr. Eleanore Sanderson 2020*  
**keen** \*, Gaelic;. A prolonged wail for a deceased person, <https://the definition.com>  
**kuia**\*, Māori; An elderly Māori woman, especially a female relative or ancestor.  
[www.lexico.com](http://www.lexico.com)

<sup>35</sup> **kete**\*, Māori; A traditional Māori basket, typically woven from flax. [www.lexico.com](http://www.lexico.com)





Jutta Chisholm, Seat, Southern Star Abbey, Kopua. 2020

*"I like the idea of going somewhere outside for spiritual direction. I like the idea of moving to a special space, a seat on the hill, a garden bench."*<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid; Chisholm Jutta; *Questionnaire 2020*

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[www.hekpu.ac.nz](http://www.hekpu.ac.nz)

[www.dictionary.com](http://www.dictionary.com)

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Spiritual Growth Ministries workshop handouts:

*Creativity and Spirituality*, Kohanga Ako Term 2, 2020

*Working with Difference*; Kohanga Ako Term 2, 2020

## **Questionnaire and Interviews:**

A key source of information for this project came from 12 written responses to a questionnaire and notes taken of and / or recordings made of a range of interviews as follows:

- 15 written questionnaires emailed to spiritual directors in the Wellington region. Of these, 5 completed the questionnaire and returned it to me; I interviewed 3 face to face, using the questionnaire, giving a total of 8;
- 3 face to face interviews with my two directees (one I interviewed twice); and,
- One face to face interview with Rt Rev Dr Eleanor Sanderson, Assistant Bishop Wellington (and the former vicar of my local parish). Dr Sanderson gave her consent to be named alongside the quotes of hers I used.

I have included the questions as an appendix for those interested.

## **Acknowledgements:**

I am extremely grateful to all those who gave so much of their time to answering my questions. Your responses made up the main body of my

research, without which my project could not have shared such a bounty of rich and inspiring insights. Thank you!

Appendix: Questions for spiritual directors

## **Special Interest Project: Companying in Sacred Spaces**

Jutta Chisholm, July 2020

### **Questions**

1. (a) Have you ever undertaken spiritual direction in any of the kinds of settings described above, and if so where and how often ?  
  
(b) Would the idea of meeting in one of these places typically have been your suggestion or the directee's?
2. Was there anything about the nature of any directee (e.g age, ethnicity), that might have made them prefer an alternative setting?
3. What special preparation, if any, did you undertake beforehand?
4. What special preparation, if any, did your directees undertake beforehand?
5. In what ways, if any, do you think the setting influenced what happened in the session?
6. In what ways, if any, did these sessions influence the directee's subsequent spiritual journey?

7. Were such sessions worth doing and if so what if anything would you do differently?
8. If you have never held a spiritual direction session in any of these settings, could you ever imagine doing so?
9. What do you think the benefits, if any, might be?
10. What do you think the drawbacks, if any, might be?
11. Would an alternative place or setting work better for some directees and not others, and if so, why?
12. Is there anything else you would wish to add?