

Doorways to the sacred

The use of visual objects in spiritual direction



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Spiritual Directors' Formation Programme of Spiritual Growth Ministries

Introduction

Visual elements can be living metaphors that evoke contemplative awareness as a kind of visio divina.
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Jesus used everyday objects with his listeners to illustrate deep spiritual truths – household items (coins, yeast, bread, wine) or objects in the natural world (flowers, grass, trees, wheat, stones, birds and animals). Today, God continues to speak to us in a variety of ways – through words, music and silence, as well as through visual creations such as art or worship centres (Townley & Davis, 2013, p. v).

In spiritual direction meeting rooms, there is often a prayer table or a small worship centre using devotional objects, to remind us that the Holy Spirit is truly the director of our lives (Driskill, 2005, p. 47).²

As part of the spiritual direction process, we help our directees explore their experiences of God. The Spiritual Growth Ministries' Special Interest Projects online³ describe the rich use in spiritual direction of art forms such as religious art, music, poetry, icons and sacred objects. Other projects outline how directors use creative processes, including journalling, collage and interactive drawing, to help directees explore their spiritual experience. Similarly, everyday objects in life can help 'connect us to the inner spaces where deeper meaning lies' (Rupp, 2009, p. 69).



This project identifies some of the ways in which visual items⁴ are being used in spiritual direction in Aotearoa New Zealand. It is based on responses to an online questionnaire in 2021, from 82 spiritual directors (members of the ASCD⁵ in NZ). The focus is firstly on visual objects, and then on assemblage. The content reflects the combined wisdom of the participants, with quotes from their experiences given for illustration. For details of the survey questions, findings and specific data, see [Appendix A](#).

¹ Quotes in italics throughout come from the 82 spiritual director participants in the survey. The title 'Doorways to the sacred' also came from one of the participants.

² I am extremely grateful to the eight directors who shared photos of assemblages that they have used. These images serve as inspiration, as well as being a reminder of the creativity and individuality each of us bring to the practice of direction.

³ Special Interest Projects https://www.sgm.org.nz/special_interest_projects_index.html

⁴ This paper uses the terms visuals, visual elements, visual items, visual materials and visual objects mostly interchangeably. See [Appendix B](#) for list of the different items used by survey participants.

⁵ Association of Christian Spiritual Directors, Aotearoa New Zealand

How do we experience God?

Contemplation includes finding space and time to pay attention to our surroundings and our experiences and notice what these tell us about God (Pickering, 2014, p 27; Rupp, 2009, p 69; Taylor, 2017, p 13). From a contemplative stance, spiritual direction involves helping directees to pay attention to the ways in which God speaks to them, and to become increasingly aware of God in their life experiences. Through exploring such awareness, directees grow in intimacy and relationship with God (Barry & Connolly, 1982; Benner, 2004).

God uses natural objects as a way to speak to people about their life experiences (Pickering, 2014, pp. 58–59). Rupp (2009, p.69) says that she often places an object before a group and asks them to relate it to a theme or their own life journey. She describes vividly the kinds of connections that people make, and how they receive healing through this process.



Visual elements can act as symbols, which ‘awaken the imagination, the questions and relationship with our God.’ (Halverson & Appleby, 2012, p. 22). Objects can evoke memories and emotions, as well as provoke deeper processing about spiritual experience. Pickering (2014, p. 102) describes how using symbols helps give some directees a way ‘in’ to their feelings, and she highlights how the visual and tactile aspects of objects contribute to this.

Visual elements can also become metaphors that ‘provide open space and thin places for the Spirit to work’ (Halverson & Appleby, 2012, p. 22). Metaphors help us in some small way to make sense of who God is. They allow us to describe the immense, mysterious and unspeakable God in ways that we are able to understand (Schrader, n.d., p. 6) as well as helping us to be more aware of our deeper selves and our whole selves (Stone & Everts, 2006, p. 2). The richness for spiritual direction is in the unpacking

of the metaphor of an object and how it speaks to the directee of God, or of their own developing understandings of God (Pickering, 2014, p. 102).

*I took an unopened magnolia bud to a meeting with a directee on retreat. I left and while she was out walking, the bud in the vase on the sunny window sill opened so widely in a couple of hours that it ‘leapt’ off the window sill, out of the vase and onto the floor. She returned to find it ‘escaped’! This was so unexpected and powerful for the directee, who saw it as her own invitation to ‘bloom’ and leap out of the constraining situation she lived in. It was a strong affirmation of her from God and could not have been orchestrated by me or her. I had walked around my garden prior to the session asking God, ‘What should I take today?’ The bud seemed the thing. I took something every day and each time it was special. On the last day of the retreat the directee asked if **she** could set up the assemblage. (Wow! Yes!) She made a lovely arrangement with her ‘birth bowl’ - a Chinese brass singing bowl and other things...the last thing was a Kinder Surprise egg which we opened and shared. Inside was a pink ring. She looked at it and realised that this was God betrothing her to himself. An older single Chinese woman, who was not valued from birth because she was a girl, had a deep healing journey through these various physical symbols, aspects of nature and spontaneous collaboration.*

Why would I NOT use visual elements in my direction?

Visual materials do not have agency in themselves. May (1992, p. 13) warns against 'endless fascination with imagery or thought' which can obscure God as the source of all experience. The six points below summarise survey responses.

Consider your directee

- a. Your directee brings to a session what God is doing in her life – visuals may or may not be part of this. Your directee should be able to 'direct' what happens in a session. Visuals may even distract from what God is doing in her life.
- b. Let your directee have the choice of whether to use visuals or not. For some directors, this may mean having visual objects available or in the background of the direction space. It could mean inviting your directees to bring visuals that have spoken to them.
- c. Your directee may not engage with visual elements for a variety of reasons. Learn about your directees' preferences – don't assume how they will react to visuals.

Consider yourself as director

- d. This project does not in any way suggest that you HAVE to use visuals. A number of respondents felt that this was something that didn't work for them personally or that it was inappropriate for their directees at their particular stage.
- e. Some directors indicated that their space was simply not appropriate for using visuals. Doing spiritual direction through Zoom, for instance, makes providing tactile objects difficult.
- f. Be aware of the wide range of visual items at your disposal. Just because a directee values using an icon, it does not necessarily mean she will relate to a tactile object from nature. While some directees may enjoy holding a cross, they may not necessarily engage with a painting.

As with the use of any 'tools', we need to be sensitive to individual directees and discern the Holy Spirit at work in their lives.

A directee today picked up a set of photos I had on the table to look at the top photo, so I asked her if she'd like to look through the photos and see if there was an image that connected with her at that moment. She identified one which we then went on to explore. It enabled her to find an image that resonated with her feelings and relationship with God.



How do visual elements contribute to spiritual direction?

The over-riding purpose for using visuals that survey participants identified was to support their directee to a deeper understanding of and relationship with God. The diagram below summarises directors' purpose in using visuals as identified by the survey participants. The aim when using visuals is to help directees 'Know God' in a deeper way.

Visuals can be used at different points in a direction session. First, the director a) uses visuals to prepare for their directee, and b) makes decisions as to how/when to use them. Visuals can help c) engage the directee, and d) lead to a deeper processing of their spiritual experience. On either side of the central diagram are words and phrases that survey participants used in describing their use of visual objects.



Diagram 1: Different ways in which visual elements contribute to spiritual direction

Each of the points on the arrow is described further below with quotes given from directors that illustrate the purpose of using the visual elements.

a) Director prepares a sacred and welcoming place

Many directors value the use of visual elements for creating sacred space. While this largely related to the use of a candle as a reminder of the presence of God, as in Phillips (2008, pp. 8–9), it was also about the director preparing a welcoming space for sacred conversations and wanting to make their directees feel special. As well, images, icons or objects provide a useful focal point in a room, and having something tangible to look at or hold can help directees to focus, particularly if feeling tired or stressed. A focal point invites a transition from outer world to inner world. For example, using a visual element (often lighting a candle) helps with centring and for contemplation.



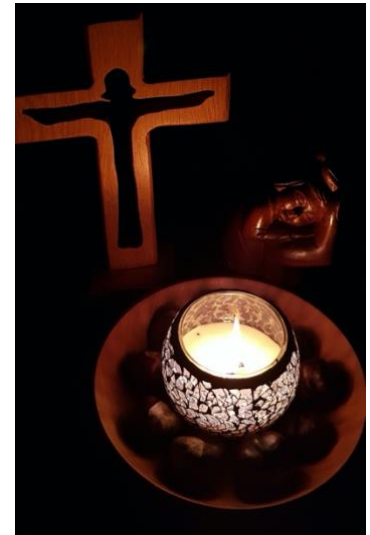
I think of a directee arriving flustered and settling in the chair and looking at what was on the table. Her body relaxed, her breath deepened and she 'arrived' as she

looked. Then she said, "I am always delighted and amazed how your focal speaks so clearly to where I am." I think it emphasizes this is a place for something sacred as well as ordinary. She can relax, be safe and open to the presence of God. The focal point connected her to God here in this place. It deepens her trust that God goes before her, God is waiting.

b) Director discerns appropriacy of use

People are all different, and some directees will relate more to visual elements than others. Directors may experience nudges from the Holy Spirit about a particular visual that might help the directee express their feelings or deepen their understanding of God, much in the way that they might use a biblical story. Directors appreciate visual reminders of God's presence as they companion others, and several commented that having visual elements was important for them in marking liturgical seasons, even if their directees didn't necessarily notice.

I recall one directee telling me she didn't really connect with objects or images. For a while, I therefore refrained from setting up a candle or anything for my sessions with her, thinking that I wanted to make the space as comfortable as possible for her. But then later on I decided that I needed some visual elements to help ground ME in the spiritual direction space with my directees. I was also conscious that sometimes when we are 'stretched' beyond our comfort zone we may experience God afresh... so I would occasionally set up something visual in the hope that through an object God might touch or bless this directee in a fresh unexpected way in our session.



c) Directee is engaged – through integrating senses and feelings

Visuals help to engage the senses. God can speak to us through what we see and touch, as well as hear, taste and smell. Some directees appreciate having something tactile to pick up and explore. Holding a cross or stone makes for an embodied experience. Visual objects can speak louder than words, especially for those directees who think and store memories visually. They may also be good for people who are not very 'feel-y' or who don't 'hear' from God easily.

Images and objects can also engage us with our emotions, and speak to us when words fail. An object may trigger an emotional response or help a directee discover her feelings about her relationship with God. Holding an object can give a directee more confidence to share her spiritual experience. Visuals can help ground someone who is distressed. As well, doing something new/different may be a catalyst for encounter or deepening.

Visual elements may also loosen creativity and encourage spontaneity. Visuals encourage left brain/right brain integration and, with the use of the senses, mean that the whole person can be present.

One session had been all around the lilies of the field... This was in a session with a very old lady without much mobility. I looked out the window and saw all these flowering weeds so I got up and picked a whole variety and gave them to her. The words had been intellectually moving but holding and examining the perfect little weed flowers moved her in her heart beyond words.

One directee used objects in the room to represent the people she was talking about - including objects to represent each of the Trinity. Her placing of each on the table - then talking about each enabled her to realise how angry she was at God the Father - and was then able to express it.

d) Directee processes and explores spiritual experience

Visuals can spark imagination or nudge a memory. They can help directees make connections or notice what is happening for them. Visual parables may bring to mind spiritual realities. Metaphors can be explored, wider thinking is stimulated, and ideas can be clarified through the use of objects or images.



As well as stimulating thinking, visual elements allow directees to better articulate their spiritual experience, to express their feelings and deepen their understanding of God. Visual objects can also open up aspects of the spiritual experience which aren't always accessed verbally. Some directors said that visuals help their directees move from 'head to heart knowing', or take them to a deeper place.

I had a picture of a girl's head being held in just a pair of hands. That picture reduced my directee to tears as she realised she was unconditionally loved by God and it deepened her relationship with God as she went on to use visual images of being held.

e) Directees become more comfortable with symbol and metaphor in spiritual growth

An added bonus is that using visual elements in direction space can encourage directees to explore objects/symbols/metaphor for themselves in the future.

Further examples of how directees initiate use of visuals in the direction environment are in [Appendix C](#).



How do visuals deepen spiritual growth?

The examples below from directors in Aotearoa New Zealand illustrate different experiences in which visual objects have contributed to a directee's deepening relationship with God. More examples using the same headings are in [Appendix D](#).

Senses: Seeing

- *I have a picture of a beautiful forest - large oak trees, lots of greens, and the light dappling the leaves and the forest floor are very inviting. I often use this image to draw the directee into contemplation and the discovery of nature and creation as a place for God's presence. Just looking at the image in silence offers directees a 'stillpoint' in their busy lives.*

Senses: Holding/touching

- *A directee held a stone sculpture signifying love and mercy and as she sat with the piece in silence, tears began to flow and she was able to recollect and re-experience God's love for her.*
- *Directee picked up a feather and stroked her face with it. She reflected on the soft and gentle nature of the feather and prayed aloud that she would 'notice' God's gentleness.*



Using the imagination

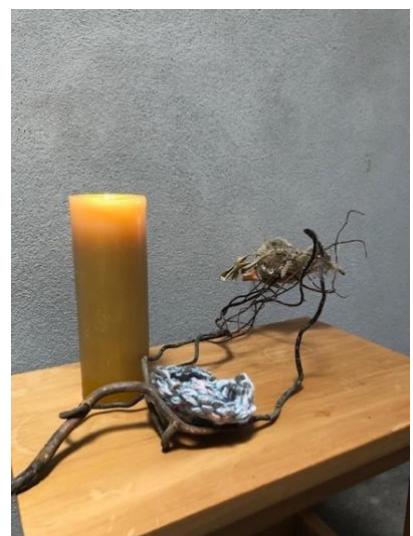
- *Directee chose a photo (from a selection) of hands kneading dough. Directee realised the hands were hers kneading the dough, trying hard to shape a particular relationship. She imagined herself kneading the dough vigorously and pouring out her pain and frustration to God. Eventually heard the invitation from God to take her hands off the dough and allow God to make it rise in God's time - trust.*
- *I have had Rembrandt's picture of the disciples in the boat with Jesus sleeping in the storm, and asked where they see themselves in the picture. Or the Mary/Martha picture and asked who they saw themselves as.*

Symbols and metaphors

- *Clay hands that express surrender, emptying and releasing as well as receiving and holding lightly.*
- *A nest on the small table led to a profound conversation about 'home'.*

Image of God/image of you → relationship with God

- *A picture of Jesus smiling/laughing has been helpful to counteract poor image of God as punitive.*
- *A white shell with a distinct black edging. Directee recognised the black accentuated the white - the light in herself. She identified that God more than loves her: God likes her - all of her with the dark and light. This was profoundly moving and revealing for her.*



How do I start using visuals with my directee?

If you have never used visual objects with your directee before, below are some simple steps for you to begin. Obviously, these need to be adapted to your context, as the alternative suggestions illustrate.

Beforehand

1. Pray that God will prompt you to make discern appropriate choices for this directee.
2. Collect several different objects and place them on a low table or tray in your direction space. Include a variety of material/colour/texture e.g. a glass koru, a stone with interesting holes, a feather.

When to use

3. Passive: Just ignore the items during your direction session. Only use the below steps if the directee notices them.
4. Active: Ask your directee at an appropriate time in the session (could be at the beginning or when they notice/comment on the items) if they would like to do something a little different as part of exploring their 'God-experience'.

What you say

5. 'Choose an item that appeals to you.' Give them time to choose.
6. Encourage them to hold/touch the item, look closely at it or feel the texture as appropriate.
7. 'Consider if there is anything about the item that speaks to you of God, of yourself, of your life?' Allow time for reflection.
8. Respond to/explore the directee's comments just as you would with any other experience they might bring to direction.

Alternative: Directee brings from home

Ask your directee to bring an object they have at home or that they find that speaks to them of God.

Alternative: Include directee in practice

Ask your directee to light a candle at the beginning as reminder of God's presence, rather than you as director always doing it.

At the start of the session I asked a directee whether they would like to light the candle. A resounding "No!" led to a session exploring God's apparent absence for the directee.

Alternative: Make an object part of your practice

Just as you may have tissues available for your directee, have something for them to hold on your table.

I may offer a holding cross or a small ceramic object of two open hands together, or something else to hold, especially when we pray together at the end of our session.

Creative ideas for using visuals when directing through Zoom

- Use email to share visual items with your directee when appropriate.
- Check out your background on Zoom. What items stand out? How do these reflect your focus in spiritual direction?

When I have sent by email a contemporary art image as something to look at, it's either with someone who knows how to work with it or I have sent instructions on how to do visio divina. Other times a picture left to the side is an invitation to connect if the directee notices it and comments on it.

- Invite the directee to have their own candle at home, and to light it as you light yours.
- Consider sharing an image on your screen if it seems appropriate. If you save images (such as religious paintings described in this project) onto powerpoint, your directee will have a large image in front of them.
- When you email your directee your Zoom link, suggest that before the session, they find a physical object round the house that might remind them of God or be a metaphor for something that they would like to talk about in direction.

Sometimes when meeting on Zoom, I invite a directee to go for a contemplative walk in their backyard before our session and allow their attention to be drawn to something and bring it to our session.



What is an assemblage?

Simply, an assemblage is a collection of objects deliberately arranged as a focal point or centrepiece. The term comes from 20th century art⁶, and has been adopted in areas as diverse as real estate, archaeology and architecture with varying definitions. The intent of assemblage in spiritual direction in the context of this project seems to be to offer visual images or metaphors that provoke or encourage the viewer to dig deeper into their understanding or experience of God.

This project identifies three ways in which an assemblage⁷ might be used to deepen relationship with God.

Firstly, the practice of altar building is ancient. In the Bible, altars were built in recognition of God being present at a particular place or time (e.g. Genesis 35, Exodus 17, Judges 6). Halverson and Appleby (2012, p. 18) describe 'worship centres' as deliberate arrangements of visuals at the front of the church as an altar, which are 'moving devotional tools'.



Altars do not just belong in churches. Setting aside a sacred space in your home for prayer or meditation has the intention of connecting to the divine (Silf, 2015; Streep, 1997; Turner, 1999). Bringing together items in your prayer place at home to create an altar is a way of 'putting spirituality into physical form' (Streep, 1997, p. 12). Symbols on a personal altar are reminders of where you have been - expressions of your faith journey (SGM, 2006, p. 36).



Another common way that an assemblage is used by directors is at group retreats. The assemblage in the middle, or at the front of the room, provides a focus point for retreatants, a place for their gaze to rest. Usually the items in the assemblage relate to the content of the retreat, and may be added to or subtly changed over time. Some directors like to include interactive elements – something for retreatants to take away, or allowing them to contribute something to the assemblage.



⁶ 'Assemblage is art that is made by assembling disparate elements – often everyday objects – scavenged by the artist or bought specially' - definition from the [Tate Gallery](#)

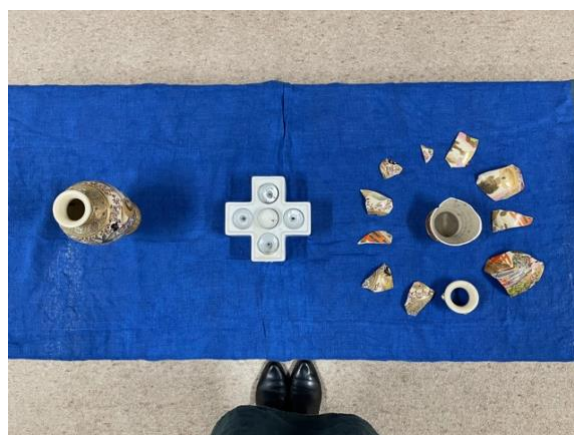
⁷ Different terms used for assemblage include prayer focus, centrepiece, focal point, the God Chair, worship centre, and home altar

In group retreat sessions where we are looking at a piece of Scripture or prayer, it's great to have an assemblage to anchor that.



I often rely to some extent on what is present in the space which means a lot of faith in God when I'm in a venue I haven't been in before. I did one weekend retreat in the Philippines where my suitcase was the main aspect of the assemblage and over each session I did different things with it. You don't have to have a lot of expense involved but you do need an 'eye' for things and an understanding of how things 'speak' and what they might say, as the directee is bound to see it differently to you.

Finally, it appears that a number of spiritual directors in Aotearoa New Zealand make use of assemblage in their direction space. Over a third of the 82 respondents said they set up an assemblage on a regular basis, while another quarter said they used them occasionally. Some said they would use them in spiritual direction on retreats or quiet days.



How do I create an assemblage?

I have sometimes displayed various objects and asked which one or ones they are drawn to and why. This is particularly helpful if they have not brought anything in particular to discuss.



There are no 'rules' for creating an assemblage, although Mazar's (1995, p. 6) assertion that images in church should be 'suggestive and open to individual reflection' could equally apply to assemblages in the spiritual direction space. Survey responses suggested some common core principles, which are outlined below.

- a. Pray before you begin to set up your assemblage. Think about your directee. Consider her interests, her story and your recent conversations. Reflect on what might be happening in her life. Let God speak to you as you prayerfully select your elements. However, endeavour to keep your assemblage open for interpretation by others.

It is part of my preparation for a directee. I pray and try to get a sense of what the directee might need. Often I will walk around the garden prayerfully open to what I might find to use. Often it will include flowers or fruit especially when the grapes are ripe!

- b. Choose elements that connect to each other in some way. Objects might offer ways to help reflection or to image our relationship with God. Many directors focus on liturgical seasons such as Easter or include symbols of the Divine, such as a candle as reminder of God's presence with us.

Using items found in nature (flowers, leaves, stones) can bring the creative outside world in, or reflect the seasons of the year. Māori connection to whenua suggests the value of using natural items.

I might find an illustration in a book that relates to a scripture reading that week; or I might add an object that has had meaning for me that week in my own prayer and reflection time. Usually I receive what I would describe as nudges from God that lead me to choose a particular picture or object. It's hard to describe. I don't always refer

to the picture or object, or draw attention to it in a session, but sometimes it will link in with something a directee shares. It's as if God's Spirit is weaving and connecting us somehow in our sacred conversations, preparing the way and readying the space in ways beyond our understanding.

- c. Don't have too much in your assemblage. Keep it simple and uncluttered. A number of directors suggest selecting only 1-3 items. Less can be more! As you arrange your items, consider variations in texture, colour, shape and different heights. Include different textures or objects that invite touch. A coloured cloth underneath can help pull items together. Choose fabric that that will highlight your grouping rather than competing with it.



The assemblages that I have are not complicated.....usually a picture behind a candle, a ceramic plate with shells, or autumn leaves etc, or a sculpture beside the candle.....in other words minimalist.

- d. Stand back once you've finished putting your assemblage together. Is it visually appealing? Does it bring a sense of beauty? Sit in your directee's chair and see how it looks from that perspective. What is the overall feel?

It needs to look harmonious. It can be humorous or earthy. I think relevance is key. And surprise is nice. People often don't expect to see an assemblage.

- e. Take time to enjoy your creativity. In the process of putting together your assemblage, the development of your own inner space (heart and soul) are of vital importance (Halverson & Appleby, 2012, p. 26). As Halverson and Appleby suggest, 'Allow yourself to receive the gift you are giving to others'.



How is an assemblage part of spiritual direction?

An assemblage often remains in the background, and is not the focus of the conversation. Directees may choose to pick up on it or not, and often they do not.

I simply offer it as an aid to the sense of sacred space. It is not 'used' in direction unless the directee responds to it in some way.

I do not usually draw attention to the assemblage. I allow it to speak for itself.

I usually call my assemblage the 'God Chair' and include it as part of our conversation. I change my assemblage every session depending on what we talked about last session, or I might intuit what the directee might be drawn to in our session ahead of time. I let the pieces 'be' and I wait until the directee asks questions about it before I bring it into the actual topic of conversation.



Directors may value having an assemblage for themselves during a session.

It inspires me and helps keep me grounded. It also gives an option for where to go if things go quiet or the directee has nothing to bring.

A few directors like to offer directees the chance to create their own assemblage as a personal altar during the direction session.

My own director has the option of creating a 'personal/living' altar with me in my sessions with her and this is something I would like to experiment with more when I have my own space again. I have a living prayer altar at home for myself and find it an enriching part of my prayer.



For me, it'd need to be led from the images that someone is working with. I would want to create a fairly neutral 'canvas' e.g. table cloth, candle etc and ask them to bring items or choose items from what I have. Otherwise the assemblage could easily shift/influence/change the person's images and content. I am reluctant to shape their starting point in an individual session.

How can an assemblage help bring a directee closer to God?

Some survey participants were concerned that an assemblage might impose the director's chosen symbols on her directee. However, if an assemblage is co-created with God, then the responsibility for spiritual experience is not ours but the Holy Spirit's (Halverson & Appleby, 2012, p. 17). The examples given below identify how directors can create an assemblage, **and** be sensitive to the direction initiated by their directee. Always the intention is to help the directee deepen their relationship with God. Further examples can be found in [Appendix E](#).

Visual image speaks of God

- *A set of paua shells in different sizes helped a directee understand how she was held and all her problems held by God.*
- *An autumn assemblage helped deepen awareness of the richness and vibrancy of the autumn season of life through Gods activity in and around her life - a sacred moment - which then led to a beautiful session exploring that in depth.*

As part of a ritual

- *I did a ritual with a directee that included stones, a basin of water, and some sea-glass. I asked the directee if we could name things that she wanted to let go of, hold the stone, and watch it sink into the water. In its place, she picked up a piece of sea-glass that she wanted to take with her to remind her of what she wants to 'add' to her life. It was a meaningful experience for her. She made up a song of praise as we did the ritual.*

As a record of experience

- *I had laid out a ring of stones - flat ones I had found on the beach that morning. My directee wrote a word, which 'stood out' for her as she was talking, on each of the stones as the session went on....words which resonated for her at the time. The written words on the stones helped my directee to literally see her heart journey that week and how God was with her all that week. My directee took the stones home as a reminder of this.*

Creating an altar

- *I once had my directee draw how she was feeling then she arranged it in the middle of the room with a bible verse and a poem and some greenery. She was moved by this and said she continued to do that in her prayer space at home as it gave her an anchor for her Christian meditation practice, which deepened her relationship.*



Conclusion

I began this project with curiosity and an open mind as to the value of using visual objects and assemblage as part of spiritual direction. As a trainee spiritual director, my tentative use of visuals with my own directees over the year has proved surprisingly successful as a way into talking about spiritual experience. In writing this project, I see myself not as an expert, but rather as curator of directors' reported experiences.

The generous sharing of experience by the survey participants, and the depth and richness of their examples have inspired me. Their stories celebrate 'the times of grace-filled awareness' that occur in spiritual direction (Dougherty, 2005, p. 29). The wonderful variety of photos volunteered by eight directors are a reminder of the power of visuals to communicate beyond words.

Our God is a creative communicator. It appears from the survey responses that the use of visuals can indeed contribute to the kind of exploration that is at the heart of spiritual direction. For some directors and directees, the use of visual objects and assemblages brings fresh life and depth to the spiritual direction space. As McAuliffe (2014, p. 11) says, 'The desire to see, touch and hold are still strong... and it seems God can use and does use them to reveal his truth and touch our hearts'.



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Appendix A: Survey

Originally, I saw the survey as a means to engage with spiritual directors who currently use visual objects, with the intention of seeking a few participants for in-depth interviews. However, the high number of respondents and the insights revealed in their replies meant this project morphed into a curation of a broader range of reported experiences.

Who participated in the survey?

In order to find out how spiritual directors use visual elements (including assemblage) in helping directees to deepen their relationship with God, a questionnaire was sent to all spiritual directors who are members of the Association of Christian Spiritual Directors, Aotearoa New Zealand. The high level of response to the questionnaire (82 of 166 online questionnaires sent – almost 50%) suggests that the use of visual elements in spiritual direction is surprisingly common, although a significant number said they would like to know more about different ways to use visuals.

What visual elements are we talking about?

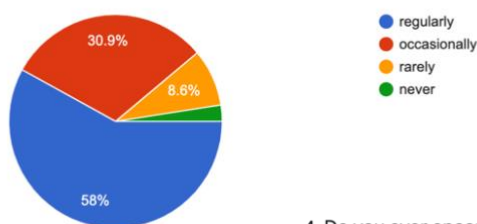
The main objects identified were candles (83%) and symbols (77%). Sacred art and images were popular (62%) as were items from nature (55%) and found items (52%). A third of respondents said they used sculptures. Directors mentioned other items, which included different visual materials (e.g. photos, picture cards), fabric and specific 3D objects. Creative processes were also mentioned – the use of interactive drawing, art materials, play dough, collage and mandalas. For further details see [Appendix B](#).

How often are visual elements used?

Almost 60% of respondents said they used visual elements regularly, with another 31% saying they used them occasionally. The survey may well have been self-selecting, in that non-users may simply not have responded to the survey, in spite of the covering email encouraging non-users to respond from their perspective. In response to the question: ‘Do you ever encourage a directee to bring or choose a visual object to talk about within a session?’, a quarter of the respondents said ‘Never’ and another quarter said ‘Rarely’.

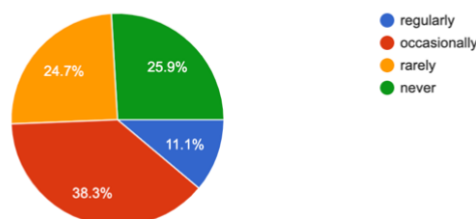
3. How often do you use visual objects in your spiritual direction sessions?

81 responses



4. Do you ever encourage a directee to bring or choose a visual object to talk about within a session?

81 responses



What questions were in the survey?

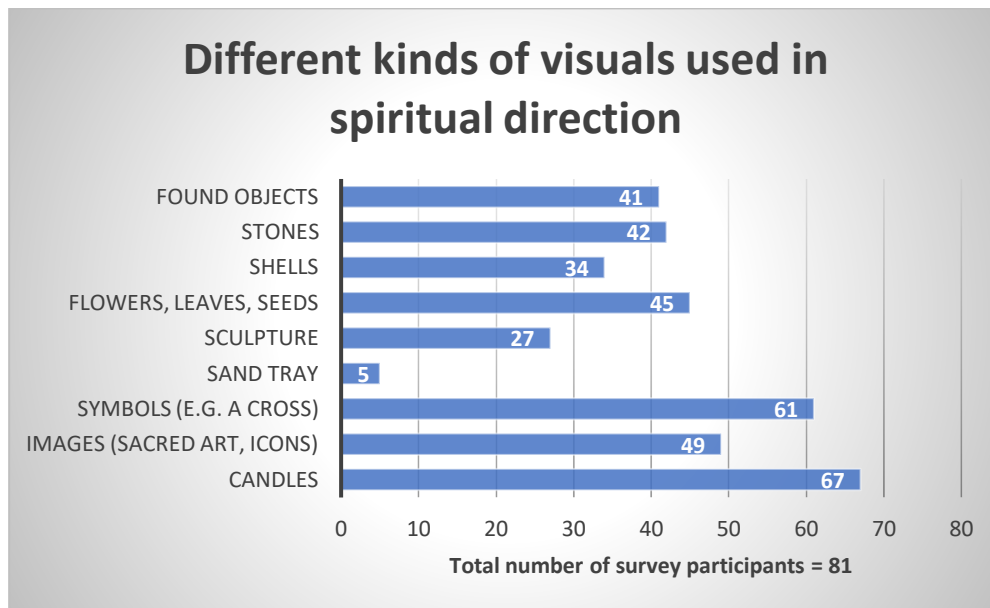
1. How long have you been a spiritual director?⁸
2. Which of the below do you use in spiritual direction sessions?
3. How often do you use visual objects in your spiritual direction sessions?
4. Do you ever encourage a directee to bring or choose a visual object to talk about within a session?
- *5. Why do you use visual elements with your directees?⁹
- *5a. Can you give an example of where using a visual has helped your directee deepen their relationship with God?
- *6. Why do you NOT use visual elements with your directees?
7. How often do you set up an assemblage in the space where you have a spiritual direction session?
- *8. Are there any principles that inform how you design/create an assemblage?
- *9. How do you relate the assemblage to your spiritual direction?
10. How often do you invite a directee to create an assemblage during a spiritual direction session? Sometimes these are called personal altars.
- *11. Can you give an example of where an assemblage (created by you or your directee) has helped your directee deepen their relationship with God?
12. If you have not used visual elements or an assemblage in your spiritual direction, are there any questions you have about this practice that could be answered in this Special Interest Project?¹⁰
13. Do you have any photos of an assemblage used in spiritual direction that you would be happy to share with others as part of this special interest project?

⁸ This question proved inconclusive, as participants were divided equally between 0-4 years, 5-14 years and 15+ years of experience.

⁹ Responses to questions with an asterisk inform the main content of this project.

¹⁰ I have endeavoured to answer most of the questions suggested by participants; a few questions were beyond the scope of this project.

Appendix B: Kinds of visual elements used by directors



Other item descriptions used by directors in addition to the above

Things to look at

- picture cards x 2 (e.g. cards from scottthepainter.com)
- powerful images on my wall e.g. Pieta
- art work (my own or other)
- photos
- national Geographic pictures
- verses or quotes enlarged

Fabric

- material x 3 (colour is meaningful)
- scarves
- fabric books

3D objects (often relate to other senses – e.g. touch, smell)

- oil burner
- crystals
- pegs, lego and all sorts of unrelated articles
- toys
- small mannikin
- hand/s x 2
- a chair to represent the presence of the Holy Spirit

Creative processes

- interactive drawing x 3
- play dough x 2 (e.g. the tactile quality of warm play dough)
- colour and art, including mandalas, paint, pastels x 2
- collage (footnote – for more on this read Karen Block SIP 2012)

Appendix C: Further examples of directees responding to a visual or assemblage

These are examples where the directee initiates discussion of a visual in the room.

- *Several directees have commented on the image of the child in the hand as helping them turn to God or hear God affirming that God/Jesus does indeed hold them.*
- *Directees say:*
 - *"Oh that is a lovely colour - makes me remember..."*
 - *"Those stones - why did you use them? It's like the grit God has in my shoe right now!"*
 - *"This holding cross is so comforting"...*
- *I found a bird's nest in the park and put it in the visual display on the coffee table. My directee noticed it immediately on arrival and spent a bit of time looking at it and talking about it... The next month when she came, the first thing she asked was, "Where is the nest?" She was disappointed that it was not in the visual display. I reassured her that it was sitting outside on a table on the deck.*
- *I had a wooden heart and my directee saw it immediately and started talking about the fact that she is seeing hearts everywhere she looks at the moment but isn't sure why. It was an opportunity to talk about it and see God's invitation.*
- *I don't initiate this but I do have a directee who will bring the quilt she is working on as often they reflect her journey.*



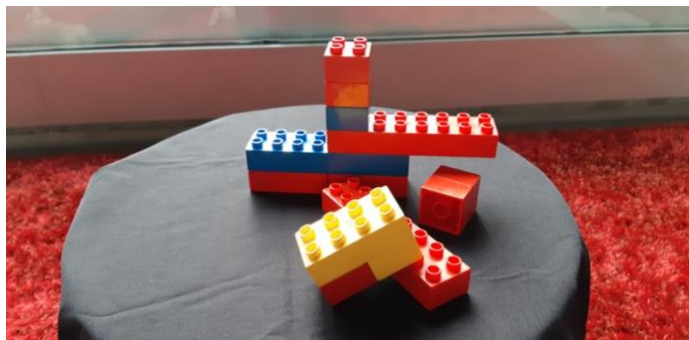
Appendix D: Further examples of how the use of visual objects has helped a directee deepen relationship with God

Senses: Seeing

- *I had placed an art work (Stanley Spencer's 'Christ in the Wilderness - The Hen') on a book stand a day or so earlier. In the course of a session with one of my directees, I pointed out the painting to her, as it seemed to reflect the image of Jesus that she was describing. I recall her gaze lingered on it as she paused to look closely at it. I am not sure if this experience deepened my directee's relationship with God, but in that session it certainly seemed to resonate with her and offer her a visual 'experience' to complement and enhance the sentiments she was sharing.*
- *A piece of art work on their wall... they reflected on what feeling they get from the art work, what it reminds them of and where they are in it and where God might be or God's invitation might be in it.*
- *I asked a directee if she might be interested in doing a collage the next time we met. I set it up for her, checked she was still ok to do this, explained the process - how God could be in the choosing of images, the positioning of them on the page and her reflection on the completed collage, as well as in our conversation afterwards. It was wonderful for her to see how God continued to speak to her through it in ways she hadn't expected at the time even in the weeks after we met. There was more seeing and hearing and she had a physical reminder of that seeing and hearing.*
- *An example was a woman whose husband died when she had young children and, being in ministry, she had never taken the time to stop and grieve his death. I asked her how she might like to do this. We met on a significant wedding anniversary and she brought photos to share with me and reflected on God's faithfulness despite this huge loss. She said that after that time she felt a deep peace and was able to talk about him without overwhelming tears.*

Senses: Holding/touching

- *Used felted pebbles and directee engaged with aspects of solidness of stone, the covering being distracting and what is hidden beneath our veneer.*
- *Having a knot of driftwood helped some explore a knotty problem as they held it.*
- *One Anglican directee makes regular use of a rosary. Another uses her holding cross.*
- *I have a wooden carving of a child leaning into a hand. A directee held and cradled it and shared her growing perception of the safety and love of God as she was experiencing it.*
- *In autumn this year I set up a visual with autumn leaves and my directee turned her attention to them during the session. She picked one up and held it while she reflected.*
- *A colored stone was used. The directee was not able to focus and was having difficulty finding God in a relationship at work. Using a stone gave her permission to ground herself. Instead of being stressed she was calm. The colours were seen as different parts of the directee and then she moved inside and could see a loving God in the difficulty. My directee still often uses a stone during prayer.*
- *One object I use is a sculpture of hands cradling a small child. It has been a profound experience for at least one directee.*



Symbols and metaphors

- *Directee talked about how a photo of a sign post relates to her life.*
- *I have invited a directee to make the sign of the cross on the back of their hand in situations where they are anxious and need to remember the presence of God with them.*
- *Sandtray object that the directee chose for God was androgenous.*
- *Holding an egg at Easter time...then painting it using different dyes which were applied more or less at random. An image of a cross appeared in the drips and allowed my directee to understand that the suffering she was going through was giving birth to a transformation within her. She hung the egg on her window as a reminder of her beautiful transformation.*
- *When I start off with a new directee, I give them a white stone. He or she is special and the journey we are about to take acknowledges that He is the one that leads us. The white stone is relating to the reading from the book of Revelation 2:17.*
- *The symbol of a flower evokes memories.*
- *Use of tree imagery going through the seasons, shedding leaves.*
- *Flowers, seeds, flame of a candle remind directee(s) of how God is always at work, even in winter!*
- *Stones. These are stones found anywhere, which I invite my directee or retreatants to choose from and hold. I use a reflection by Joyce Rupp titled 'Courage Stones'. It is a way to engage with more than the present; with a millennial past in fact. Looking at the stone and the many years it was hidden underground as part of a massive whole mountain perhaps. Seeing how it now glistens, or is small, or is smoother...*
- *This week I added a few printed and cardboard-mounted photos of monarch butterflies/caterpillars/a dark chrysalis/an empty chrysalis, etc, because I had taken these photos in the last few days.*
- *An aqua-coloured ripple scarf helped a directee to reflect on the ever-flowing stream of God's love.*



Imagination

- *I sometimes use Rembrandt's painting of the Prodigal Son and Father, with the elder brother standing in the shadows on the side, and it's a great visual that invites consideration of who the directee relates to most. This has impacted several people over recent times, inviting into the outrageous grace of the Father.*
- *Using Rembrandt's painting of The Return of the Prodigal created a profound context for a directee's own journey and attitude in a difficult relationship*

Image of God/image of you → relationship with God

- *A directee drew pictures of herself in a wedding dress with Jesus as her spouse.*
- *My copy of the Icon of friendship has been appreciated by a directee as a way of connecting with Christ the friend. (Also rejected by another directee who said he couldn't see the point of icons.)*
- *I had the nativity scene set out on the coffee table as it was close to Christmas. My directee picked up on the theme of royalty, exploring how they were included in a relationship with God who is royalty and how they were royalty too.*
- *Another was a small wooden figure with movable limbs (artists use them for drawing figures) we thought about how the directee's stance is toward either a situation or in a relationship with God.*

- *Colourful seed pods scattered on a table one day helped a person go deeper with God in surrendering in her need for perfection and control - she wanted to tidy them up!*
- *A small wooden figure with movable limbs (artists use them for drawing figures. We thought about how the director's stance is toward either a situation or in a relationship with God.*



Appendix E: Further examples of how an assemblage relates to spiritual direction.

General

- *One directee asked to borrow one of the figurines after a spiritual direction session and said it was significant for them.*
- *They refer back to it again as marking the time and place or time they heard God speak in some way.*
- *Once a directee placed themselves on the scene in relation to how they see God in their life.*

Creating an altar

- *Directees have reported back that they have created a space/place at home and it helps create a peaceful nook to pray in.*
- *At the beginning of last year, a directee was encouraged by someone at church to create a personal altar at their home, a place where she could place all her unknowings into God's hand each morning. This personal altar really helped her. 2 or 3 months ago, the same directee told me how she doesn't need to make a physical altar anymore, because her trust in God has grown so much over the past year or so, that she can now entrust her unknowing to God interiorly.*
- *A deepening of relationship has occurred when directee has spoken of creating a space at home for the intimacy of their time with God. Also I think any time a directee interacts with something on the table at whatever stage of the session.*
- *I once had my directee draw how she was feeling then she arranged it in the middle of the room with a bible verse and a poem and some greenery. She was moved by this and said she continued to do that in her prayer space at home as it gave her an anchor for her Christian meditation practice, which deepened her relationship.*

Retreats

- *I have used the personal altar idea in a group retreat setting. They found that really helpful.*
- *I included an unfinished knitting project in my prayer focus (assemblage) and that became a meaningful symbol of God's work in her life for a retreatant.*
- *Usually as part of a retreat Eucharist illustrating what the retreat journey has meant to them.*
- *The group brings items of significance they have found and speak of why.*
- *Have used an assemblage in group session on retreat when introducing a spiritual discipline, direction practice. eg Used an outdoor bench seat in the middle of room, with a few bits of greenery around it, to symbolise silence and solitude. A couple of people came and sat on the seat during the day of silence - connecting to the practice and the symbolism of place.*





Assemblages used in retreats

