

The Gift We Offer

Spiritual Direction
And The Rebirth Of Missional Community
In Our Neighbourhoods

by
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Dedication

Joan Davidson (1934-2012)

To my dear friend-in-community, Joan. You walked with me, prayed for me, and made me laugh. Your loving presence sustained me in community and brought hope in times of despair. And your life birthed in me a curiosity about the art of spiritual direction.

Thank you.

Introduction

In every generation old-but-good ideas will be recycled. The rebirth of intentional Christian community in the West is one such phenomenon. I come to this topic from my own nine year journey with missional community in Addington, Christchurch, and it is my hope that this conversation – albeit one-sided – will combine my own context with other material to support the spiritual director working with people from this setting.

For me, missional community life and my experience of spiritual direction are deeply entwined. Yet spiritual direction remains largely unfamiliar to many Christian people.¹ This paper aims to raise awareness among spiritual directors of the reinvention of missional community happening locally. We will look at what community life is like, how communities develop, problems that arise, and what spiritual direction can offer.²

Back to the neighbourhood

Based somewhat on the model pioneered in Addington, my home church, South West Baptist³ has adopted neighbourhood community as its central approach to local mission. Alongside the wide-ranging community ministries for which the church is well known, there are now nine neighbourhood communities at various stages of development around the church.⁴

¹ I believe this to be true anecdotally due to the number of people who, in asking about my studies, say they have not heard of spiritual direction. Happily, this is changing: from time to time in sermons our senior pastor refers to his own spiritual direction conversations. And a note on terms used: I use “faith community” or “church” to denote the congregation of believers – usually South West Baptist Church in Christchurch for me, but sometimes the wider faith community. And I use “missional community”, “neighbourhood community” and “intentional community” interchangeably to refer to groups of people who come together to bring the light and life of the gospel into their own neighbourhoods.

² If the reader is interested in finding a director, please see the Appendix for recommendations and resources to help you engage helpfully with this practice.

³ In 2013, Spreydon and Halswell Baptist Churches combined to become South West Baptist Church.

⁴ See the church’s website for how this currently looks: <http://www.swbc.org.nz/community/local-communities/>. (Viewed 14 October 2015)

Churchgoing people are gathering in their neighbourhoods, praying together, and engaging with their neighbours, especially those often overlooked. We are moving back to the neighbourhood, not with buildings but with relationships.

This idea is not new: Christ coming to the neighbourhood is reminiscent of the first chapter of John's gospel or Paul's remarkable poem in Philippians 2. As Scott Bessenecker puts it in *The New Friars*,

It is one of God's recurring dreams to raise up servants intent upon reaching those who have been impoverished materially, spiritually and emotionally – those people who have been forgotten, abused and rejected.⁵

For more than a decade the dream of local community mission has found a home in my heart. In 2004 Ian and I joined a home group that began to dream about relocating to live close to one another. We wanted to invest our relationships, resources and energies in a neighbourhood, and see what God might do. So, in 2007 my husband, our youngest daughter, and I moved across town to Addington.⁶ Our goal was to follow Jesus together by living in the same neighbourhood and sharing the journey of learning to love God, each other and our neighbours locally and globally.⁷

Eight years later, we remain committed. Many others have joined us, and a few have moved on. The journey has been exciting, exhausting, challenging and inspiring. So, what is it like inside one of these communities? A brief look at Addington's strengths, values and rhythms will provide our example.

What's it like?

Community living can be the best of times, and the worst of times.⁸ Addington community at its best is seen in lasting friendships with people often forgotten, in practical support during hard times, in celebrating joys, in prayer 'triads' where vulnerability is welcomed and God's transforming presence is sought, in commitment to working together locally, in persevering through hurt and misunderstanding, and in amazing pot luck meals. (Good food is definitely at the heart of the Addington experience.) It is quite a list!

We began with nine values: God, Community, Transformation, Grace, Servanthood, Beauty, Simplicity, Justice and Hope.⁹ Anthony Watt, Addington's founder, qualified these as more "an agreement in advance about what we will forgive one another for, because we realise that

⁵ Bessenecker, Scott A, *The New Friars* (Downers Grove IL, IVP: 2006), pp 15-16.

⁶ The suburb of Addington was chosen largely for pragmatic reasons: it was a neighbour to our home church, and housing was affordable.

⁷ Taken from a community bookmark.

⁸ Apologies to Charles Dickens.

⁹ From the Addington Neighbourhood Community document. Unpublished.

when we fail on these we will hurt the other.”¹⁰ We have worked hard together but we recognise we have not always loved well. We have failed and misunderstood each other: we have also been misunderstood. We have learned through these experiences which I suspect are less common and intense in some other lifestyles.

Our rhythms include a fortnightly home group, monthly pot-luck, quarterly fun days, and an annual weekend away. Core members¹¹ commit to an additional fortnightly meeting, weekly prayer and devotional rhythms, and to serving regularly in one of the community’s major projects: local school, business, or farmlet.

So that is Addington. Other communities are different, but in Addington the level of commitment we share means significant issues, personal and interpersonal, come to the fore. Before looking at what it is like to ‘hit the wall’ in community, let us consider one useful model of community-making.

How communities grow up

Various models of community exist, but one we have referred to at times in Addington was proposed by Scott Peck. Peck describes four stages of community-making: Pseudo-community, Chaos, Emptiness, and Community. Because this structure can be helpful for people working through difficulties in community, we will look at each briefly.

1. Pseudo-community or ‘faking it.’ Everyone is pleasant and avoids disagreement, but denying our differences leads to a shallow conformity.
2. When a community encourages the expression of difference, it quickly descends into Chaos. Our differences may be in the open but this is so unpleasant that groups often retreat to the relative security of the previous stage. To move on, a group needs to acknowledge that fighting is preferable to faking.
3. The way ahead from Chaos is into the discomfort of Emptiness. Here we are each called to let go of barriers to communication. There are many of these: expectations, prejudices, ideology, theology, solutions, the need to convert, fix, or solve, and the need to control. This stage requires significant personal sacrifice by group members.
4. When this happens a group can find true Community. Members are able to speak with vulnerability and a truth previously un-accessed. There is sadness, joy, deep listening, and the beginnings of healing.¹²

¹⁰ Withington, Steve, *Life Together in Addington: The short version of a Master’s Degree Thesis Presented to Laidlaw-Carey Graduate School of Theology* (Auckland NZ, unpublished: July 2012), p 9.

¹¹ Addington and other communities from South West Baptist Church comprise ‘Core’, ‘Committed’ and ‘Connected’ people. Core members are those who are following God’s call to be actively in Addington as their main place of service. Committed people sign up for at least one of the rhythms. Connected people are everyone else – neighbours or South West people living locally, who come along but have varying degrees of identification with the group.

¹² Peck M Scott, *The Different Drum* (New York NY, Touchstone: 1987), Chapter 5: Stages of Community-Making.

In my practice of spiritual direction I companion people who struggle with community at various points of development. The community's stage comes alongside the directee's own experience and personality.

Two examples of this by way of illustration: First, a struggle with Pseudo-community. Pseudo-community is a place of peace only because no one rocks the boat. One of my directees expressed it this way:

I don't 'love' gossiping, and I actually shut that down as much as I can, but *I want to feed things back somehow. I just don't know how, and in what way, and how it would be useful.* ... Without sound like you're whinging or whatever. (Emphasis added)

Later in the same session this directee describes aspects of *Emptiness*: what it is like for her having moved from a different role elsewhere:

I'm used to knowing what's happening, and used to being part of it. And now I'm not. I hear things second hand. I hear about things as they're happening, rather than being part of that journey.

She is having to give things up. The journey through Emptiness is not easy.

Recently another directee was struggling with Emptiness: letting go of his own ideas about fixing or solving. He was about to head out of town with others from his community and spoke of being unhappy with the plan for the time away together. He was feeling "lukewarm" about it all. I asked what the word "lukewarm" meant to him in this context, and he described "not feeling invested enough" or "not giving my all." On thinking about what the issue would be for him to just 'be present' with his community for the weekend, he replied,

It's probably the best thing I can do. But it's just not my usual response. But I feel it is the response I'm called to – just to go with it and be part of it anyway. Still be present. ... I guess it's me getting OK with that, and wondering if it's still valid and worthwhile.

Learning to 'be present' without needing to impose his ideas on the group was a step of growth for this directee.

Groups may or may not follow Peck's model, but it is useful for spiritual directors to recognise the processes of the community alongside the journey of the directee. Peck describes community-building 'events' that perhaps last a weekend: our community members commit to a journey a year, and usually much longer. Community-making may take years, and the group (and individuals within it) may see-saw between Pseudo-community and Chaos for long periods, perhaps dipping into Emptiness at times, all with a hope for true Community to emerge. The community's stage is likely to impact the directee's feelings about herself and the group, more so if she is unaware.

Hitting the wall

Community life is rich and testing. The challenges range from disappointment to full-blown crisis. Everyone who commits to follow Christ – in community or not – hits the wall at some stage: it is necessary for our growth.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer speaks directly:

The sooner this shock of disillusionment comes to an individual and to a community, the better for both. A community which cannot bear and cannot survive such a crisis, which insists upon keeping its illusion when it should be shattered, permanently loses in that moment the promise of Christian community. Sooner or later it will collapse.¹³

To the individual, Richard Rohr says,

Sooner or later, if you are on any classic “spiritual schedule,” some event, person, death, idea or relationship will enter your life that you simply cannot deal with... Spiritually speaking, you will be, you must be, led to the edge of your own private resources. At that point you will stumble over a necessary stumbling stone ... you will and you must “lose” at something. This is the only way Life-Fate-God-Grace-Mercy can get you to change, let go of your egocentric preoccupations, and go on the further and larger journey.¹⁴

Tripping on the “necessary stumbling stone” is God’s tool for our transformation. For me it came through misshapen relationships, and disappointments with community. My spiritual director accompanied me through the grief and anger, encouraging me to keep saying “yes” to God even in failure.¹⁵ Spiritual companionship has much to offer those who, in God’s grace, are led this way. The end of one’s own resources is so often the very place of significant growth.

But disillusionment and failure are not the only wall. Burnout is also a real possibility when people active in communities “bleed emotional energy” for too long.¹⁶ In 2012, stories of the Addington community were compiled by Dr Steve Withington, who observed:

The self-imposed stresses of life in Community are many, and are associated with considerable risk of being “honourably wounded,” as Marjory Foyle so aptly terms

¹³ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *Life Together* (New York NY, HarperCollins: 1954), p 27.

¹⁴ Rohr, Richard, *Falling Upward* (San Francisco CA, Jossey Bass: 2011), pp 65-66.

¹⁵ This process will never be pleasant, but readers familiar with the Enneagram will understand that this a particularly difficult assignment for a One! From the Enneagram Institute website: “Ones are conscientious and ethical, with a strong sense of right and wrong. They are teachers, crusaders, and advocates for change: always striving to improve things, but afraid of making a mistake. Well-organized, orderly, and fastidious, they try to maintain high standards, but can slip into being critical and perfectionistic. They typically have problems with resentment and impatience. At Their Best: wise, discerning, realistic, and noble. Can be morally heroic.” (<https://www.enneagraminstitute.com/type-1>)

¹⁶ Riddell, David J, *Living Wisdom Life and Counselling Skills Manual* (2010), Section 4.8.

it, resulting in significant psychological distress, burnout and depression.¹⁷ In this sense members of Addington are very comparable to those involved in global mission, and in many other forms of Christian ministry. To date the [Addington Neighbourhood Community's] major emphasis on transforming one's 'relationship with self' seems to me to consist in challenging the surrounding culture's addiction to self-centredness through voluntary commitment to shared community around Christ, and as a physician and pastor I strongly endorse this spiritual prescription as 'essential medicine.' It does not, however, follow that other means of self-care are unnecessary, or will automatically happen.¹⁸

Spiritual direction can offer that needed care to individuals. Many resources are available to assist those at risk of being 'honourably wounded': one pattern for wholeness I attempt to use myself is proposed by *Gravity*:

Sabbath for Rest,
Retreats for Reflection,
Vacations for Recreation,
Sabbaticals for Renewal.¹⁹

The offer of spiritual companionship

So what exactly is it that spiritual direction offers to people in community who, one way or another, are brought to the end of themselves?

For the Christian living in community, as for anyone, spiritual direction is a process in which two people meet regularly, with an agreement for one to support the other's desire to attend to her relationship with God, discover what God is doing in her life, and respond fully in faith. So, as for anyone coming into a direction relationship, spiritual direction is a place where the directee can "hear, see and respond to God."²⁰

But there are some gifts a director brings that work alongside a community journey particularly well. The first is in providing balance. Community living is prone to highs and lows. A director will do well to encourage community-based directees to find a path towards serenity. The second is in carrying some of the community's load. Community is a great place to learn, grow and give, but it can also be leaned on too much. A trail of disappointments leaves people tired and vulnerable. A spiritual director aware of this helps shoulder some of this burden simply by providing a safe place of care and understanding. Thirdly, the direction relationship can encourage reflection. A wise director holds up a mirror to the directee,

¹⁷ Marjory Foyle, *Honourably Wounded: stress among Christian workers*, 2nd Ed. (Essex, MARC, 1990)

¹⁸ Withington, Steve, *Life Together in Addington: The short version of a Master's Degree Thesis Presented to Laidlaw-Carey Graduate School of Theology* (Auckland NZ, unpublished: July 2012), p 74.

¹⁹ <https://gravitycenter.com/> (viewed 24 October 2015)

²⁰ Bakke, Jeanette, *Holy Invitations* (Grand Rapids MI, Baker Books: 2000), p 18.

reflecting what they say and maybe what they do not say. This perspective is very helpful. Fourthly, individuals in community benefit from persisting with individual discernment: what is God saying? It can be easy to fall into a pattern of assuming community leadership will discern on behalf of individuals. Unintentionally, people can be disempowered in their own maturing. A director who encourages the directee to listen to God's voice for herself, will help avoid this possibility. Lastly, in the crises of individual and community, the director provides a safe place for processing hurt and disillusionment while pointing the wounded person towards the God who knows suffering well and loves without measure.

The director thus provides an outside voice and a safe place. If the director has read and understood some of the material that is shaping this movement, he or she will have greater resources on which to draw.

In the last few years, as missional communities have matured (or disbanded), some excellent books have been produced. Three in particular I would like to draw the reader's attention to are *Unexpected Gifts* by Chris Heuertz, *The Intentional Christian Community Handbook* by David Janzen, and *Living into Community* by Christine Pohl. The existence of these books demonstrates a desire for Christians in community to keep pressing on in the journey to grow in relating to God, self and others.

Where to from here?

We have travelled a winding road through one example of intentional missional community and some theoretical material around the rebirth of this phenomenon locally.

Alongside the gift of independence and confidentiality, spiritual directors have listening skills, spiritual experience and life experience to offer people at any stage of community life, but perhaps most critically when they 'hit the wall'. If the practice of spiritual direction is known and encouraged in our communities, and if directors understand the mix of ordinary and peculiar stresses that come with a commitment to intentional community, significant growth can be brought to birth.

Directors accustomed to working largely with mature people may need to rethink, as many young adults are committing to community life. They are usually energetic and idealistic, and they are often activists, but they are all looking for something more from their experience of faith and church. My hope is that for my own faith community, and wider, spiritual directors and the community-minded will meet, and those in missional communities will find support for the development of the contemplative practices they need to sustain health and spread God's love, mercy and justice in our neighbourhoods.

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Appendix

Engaging with Spiritual Direction

For those of us who live in missional communities, the practice of spiritual direction may be unfamiliar foreign. If you (like me) are more familiar with Protestant or evangelical spirituality, you may find it helpful to find out a bit more even as you consider phoning, emailing or texting to make an initial appointment with someone nearby.

There really is only one requirement on your part: a desire to know God. Jesus prayed for us in John 17, “Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.” Maybe you are young (in faith or age) and are enthusiastic in your following after God. Maybe you have travelled many years of faith and recognise questions or experiences that you would like to share with a trustworthy other. Maybe your spiritual life has become difficult and you long for someone to walk with you towards a place of freshness and deeper understanding. Your spiritual direction journey awaits!

There are many, many books introducing spiritual direction. I am going list just a few that I have personally found helpful. *Holy Invitations* and *The Friend of the Bridegroom* are both excellent good introductions to spiritual direction. *When the Well Runs Dry* talks about finding a new depth and refreshment in prayer. *Candlelight* gives a glimpse of what happens in a spiritual direction session by following the stories of a number of directees: fascinating and encouraging to the directee – and challenging for the director! I loved it. And lastly, Chris Heuertz’s recent book, *Unexpected Gifts*, which looks at our failures and doubts personally and with community. Reading this may well inspire a list of topics to bring to direction.

Phillips, Susan, *Candlelight* (Harrisburg-New York, Morehouse Publishing: 2008)

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