

# **The Challenge and the Grace of Spiritual Direction in Ordained Ministry**

- in particular in the context of the Anglican Church.

by

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**A Research Project submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the  
Spiritual Directors' Formation Programme of Spiritual Growth Ministries**

## **The Cure of Souls**

At ordination clergy receive and accept the responsibility as a servant for the *cure of souls*, which has at its core, nurturing and service through spiritual direction and formation. For one reason or another, it seems this role is obscured and not fully activated by many. Natural Church Development statistics<sup>1</sup> show Passionate Spirituality to be in a dismal state across many parishes. There may be corresponding factors between these statistics and ministries. This paper will explore possible contributing issues and some thoughts for re-discovering spiritual direction and nurture as the everyday ‘tools of trade’ of clergy ministry. Underpinning this paper is the echo<sup>2</sup> of Evelyn Underhill’s voice from the 1930s, calling clergy to encounter the living God in their own lives and then nurturing the same in their ministries in the *cure of souls* to those around them. This paper recognises that for ministry to be deeply effective it must follow the lead of the Holy One in nurturing individual relationships with God. While spiritual direction and formation ministries may vary in their ‘look’, the focus is one of ‘soul companionship’ in the *experience* of God in people’s lives.

## **The Problem**

Evelyn Underhill recognised a real hunger for the deep things of the spirit in the 1930s and others recognise the same today. There is rightly an expectation of guidance in these matters from the ordained. Spiritual guidance however requires finely honed sensitivities and compass focused on the transcendent and incarnate love and presence of God. Many clergy have not been exposed to spiritual direction themselves or equipped for this vital role. Pickering, 2008, says<sup>3</sup> just because people are ordained ministers they don’t necessarily have a highly disciplined, effective and rewarding spiritual life which includes a lively relationship with God. Leading others spiritually is dependent on being in communion with the source of life and growth.

Holmes<sup>4</sup> expresses the opinion that many people come to their priest or pastor seeking spiritual growth and are frequently given poor advice. Some<sup>5</sup> believe clergy are no longer wanted in helping people with their intimate spiritual needs. Could it be that people see ‘busy managers’<sup>6</sup> instead of seeing those with whom they can share ‘deep to deep’? Too, it may be that some people are affected by a negative attitude and lack of trust towards the church and its leaders.

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<sup>1</sup> Gerritsen, 2009

<sup>2</sup> Pickering, 2008, p23

<sup>3</sup> Pickering, p3

<sup>4</sup> Holmes 1982, p155

<sup>5</sup> Leech,2001, Introduction

<sup>6</sup> Jeff, 1987, p6

Archbishop Ramsey placed the ministries of direction and guidance very high in a priest's priorities and saw it bluntly as a terrible judgement resting on the priest who is unable to give help or guidance because they have ceased to be persons of prayer<sup>7</sup>. Peterson, though recognising that clergy have moved away from spiritual direction, which had once loomed large at the centre of their work, tends to write hopefully however of a re-examination and move back to the '*cure of souls*'.

### **Blurred Model**

That there is a confusing picture of spiritual direction over the centuries with no easily appropriated model may be a contributing factor to a lack of clarity in clergy. Christian spiritual direction is commonly dated from the time of the Desert Fathers. Over the centuries mixed images range from those of great sanctity and discernment, to monastic discipline and privilege, strict, even cruel authoritarianism, the confessional, the anamchara, soulfriend and the startsy. Spiritual direction was within classical Christian understanding, a personal ministry which took place within a corporate framework, a framework of sacrament, discipleship and social action<sup>8</sup>. Joseph de Guibert<sup>9</sup> distinguished between three types of direction – sacramental, pastoral and spiritual. Between varieties of Christian too there is a blurred picture – the distinction, for example between the Roman Catholic confessor of the Middle Ages and the Westminster Divines and Protestant codes of behaviour and discipline may not be very distinct after all in their outworking. Holmes<sup>10</sup> sees a negative communal memory of the tyrannical spiritual director as a legacy of the late Middle Ages and early modern period. The non-directive approach, where directees are assisted to reflect on their own individual experience of God is a recent development and is possibly reflective of an anti-authoritarian ethos in twentieth-twentyfirst century society and as with all methodologies can be exposed to the limitations of its own self – in this case in its reluctance to definitive value statement. Within the Anglican Church, Jeremy Taylor wrote in 1660, 'let every minister exhort his people to a frequent confession of their sins, and a declaration of the state of their souls; to a conversation with their minister in spiritual things<sup>11</sup>.' However with few exceptions, such as the school of theology around Evelyn Underhill or Gilbert Shaw, or Martin Thornton, there has been little articulation of spiritual direction until recently in Anglicanism. There has been rather an interest in counselling and therapy in the context of the *cure of souls*. The dominant focus seems not been in the

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<sup>7</sup> Leech, 2001, p31

<sup>8</sup> Leech, 2001, pxviii

<sup>9</sup> Leech, 2001, p69

<sup>10</sup> Holmes, 1982, p170

<sup>11</sup> Leech, 2001, p74

personal spirituality area at all but in liturgical renewal, parish strategy and social witness<sup>12</sup>. There is no easily appropriated model.

### **The Relationship**

Whether it be lay or ordained called to spiritual direction, guidance, soul companionship or friendship, certain fundamentals exist in what Guenther calls a ‘covenanted relationship’. This relationship is also expressed by some as a ‘sacramental sign’ of God’s loving care. Spiritual direction takes place when the minister and parishioner or director and directee are both intentional about paying attention to what God is doing in the parishioner’s/directee’s life<sup>13</sup> Merton sees<sup>14</sup> a ‘true director’ as never getting over the awe felt ‘in the presence of a person, an immortal soul, loved by Christ, washed in His most Precious Blood, and nourished by the sacrament of His Love.’ Peterson describes spiritual direction as conducted with awareness that it takes place in God’s active presence and that conversation is therefore conditioned by speaking and listening, the Holy One being there<sup>15</sup>. Contemplative, incarnational spiritual direction is enabled by a director helping a person pay attention to God’s communication to him/her and to respond to this personally communicating God<sup>16</sup>. This is where seeds of passionate spirituality can be sown. This is where passion excites a human heart touched by God.

### **The Challenge**

How can clergy engage in nurturing this growth and what may be some of the pitfalls involved? Bakke says<sup>17</sup> that ‘part of the challenge in spiritual direction is discovering the appropriate level of interdependence between two adults who are listening to the Holy Spirit on behalf of one of them.’ While this is certainly possible, it is something that clergy must be careful about. For example are there any possible conflicting loyalties – for example does the potential directee hold office in the parish where the clergy person works? By considering any existing relationship with the directee, thought needs to be given to whether or not this might impinge on the direction journey at any time; bearing in mind that in a direction relationship there must be ‘freedom’ and safety to explore. Clergy need discernment, discipline and good understanding of different ministries when they manage dual roles with colleagues and parishioners they know well or work with. Whether a long or short term working relationship is envisaged the boundaries and the purpose of the relationship must be very clear and articulated at the very beginning. This is sometimes

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<sup>12</sup> Leech, 2001, p78

<sup>13</sup> Pickering, 2008, p2

<sup>14</sup> Merton, 1960, p34

<sup>15</sup> Peterson, 1987, p192

<sup>16</sup> Pickering, 2008, p26-27

<sup>17</sup> Bakke, 2000, p250

called a 'working alliance' based on a mutual agreement – it is to this working alliance whose only purpose is the development of the directee's relationship with God, that the director's loyalty lies.

Clergy can be seen to hold power in a relationship, even if they don't believe it, of status, prestige, or in the ministry of the confessional associated with judgment and in the dispensing of sacraments. While clergy may see they hold these responsibilities in a ministry of love, it is necessary to be aware of how others may feel. Directee/parishioners relationships can be subject to unhelpful dynamics where clergy are attributed inappropriate attributes perhaps leading to unhealthy dependency.

Christian spiritual direction cannot be value-free. The very title denotes belief in Christ and fundamentals of faith, hope and love. There are times when a clergy person may be called by their care and ordination to honestly state the beliefs and values of the God they represent. This witness needs to be held very carefully beside the knowledge that the only true director is the Holy Spirit. Guenther<sup>18</sup> talks about the danger of the well-meaning and spiritually bossy charging into someone's life and doing real damage. Peterson<sup>19</sup> discusses how easy and tempting it is for clergy to spill out answers and commentary while they need to remember they are only supporting players in the story of Grace and not mistake themselves for the primary partner in the conversation – hence getting in the way. Thurian, 1985, probes even deeper into Clergy director motivation when he sees it as a delicate and complex task for it is the temptation of the pastor to cultivate a kind of possessiveness, authoritarianism along with the desire for personal esteem, intimacy and affection. How the power is exercised in a spiritual direction/formation relationship where a directee gives a director access to their 'innermost' is a key moral issue in the pastoral relationship.

Given that there are certainly obstacles at times, clergy can be cautioned but also strengthened and enabled by awareness of such issues. The call of the ordained is to respond to what the laity wants from the priesthood, a 'genuine love of souls', and the core of such ministry is deep attention to individual relationships with God.

Related to this seems the 'safeguard' of the character/attitude of the clergy alluded to by many writers. Clergy are very visible – center-stage whether they like that or not, in the life of a parish. The value of a transparently good priest who bears the marks of humility and spiritual wisdom and invites and points the way is inestimable. Leech<sup>20</sup> speaks of the first and essential characteristic of the spiritual guide as holiness of life and closeness to God and Guenther looks to a relationship where the director 'puts himself aside'<sup>21</sup>. Pickering<sup>22</sup> speaks of those directors who always point to the One who is greater. These all speak of a

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<sup>18</sup> Guenther, 1993, Forward

<sup>19</sup> Peterson, 1987, pp189-191

<sup>20</sup> Leech, 2008, p84

<sup>21</sup> Guenther, 1993, Introduction

<sup>22</sup> Pickering, 2008, p2

genuine humility under God, which seems recognisable and hard to fake and which is likely to affect any spiritual formation relationship. It is perhaps relevant to reflect on the recommendation of St Francis – ‘preach the gospel at all times - if necessary use words.’ To therefore be a *cure of souls* one must first walk humbly and dependently with the living God because the only true director or guide is the Holy Spirit. Spiritual direction is then as Bakke says one of the ‘gifts’ that overflows out of a life of prayer and listening to God.<sup>23</sup>

### **Opportunities**

Having discussed some potential difficulties that clergy may experience in the *cure of souls*, it is also to be said that clergy have exciting opportunities ‘on their doorstep’ to nurture souls in spiritual formation. Clergy hold their positions as spiritual leaders - it is natural for people to look to them for guidance. Time and again clergy hear questions and comments that are only the tip of an iceberg on such things as prayers, fears, belief and major life decisions. Peterson<sup>24</sup> says ‘More often than we think, the unspoken, sometimes unconscious reason that persons seek out conversation with the pastor is a desire to keep company with God.’ Pickering<sup>25</sup> gives an example of a pastor keeping in mind when visiting the question, ‘What is the Holy Spirit doing here in and around this person?’ This then is to develop alertness for conversations that can open up areas of spiritual need and exploration and focus ministry on the person’s relationship with God. Pickering reports<sup>26</sup> one Anglican vicar commenting, ‘The change of focus in pastoral ministry to that of spiritual direction means that whenever I am with people, in a variety of ministry situations, I am constantly asking myself: ‘How can I foster this person’s or this group’s relationship with God? He adds ‘being a spiritual director doesn’t mean introducing a new rule or adding another item to ever-extended job descriptions, but simply rearranging perspective.’ Hence the focus of parish ministry can move back to the traditional *cure of souls*, through paying attention to the ways God is touching people in their lives. This then can be following Grace rather than running ahead of it. It becomes ministry focused on looking for transcendence, it is incarnational and concerned with the everyday things of people’s lives, a matter of prayerful attentiveness.

How such a ministry could be practically exercised will be as varied as the variation of people, ministry units or parishes. Pickering<sup>27</sup> speaks of a vicar of a large parish who offers three or four individual direction sessions to those who want this, after which those people are referred to a group that can support spiritual direction exploration or to a spiritual director or both. In some places like the Diocese of Southwark there has been growth in

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<sup>23</sup> Bakke, 2000, p 107

<sup>24</sup> Peterson, 1987, p192

<sup>25</sup> Pickering, 2008, p192

<sup>26</sup> Pickering, 2008, p188

<sup>27</sup> Pickering, 2008, p191

networks of training for spiritual directors and guides (SPIDIR), and structures to provide lay direction support for clergy in parishes. Sometimes people are best served in brief unplanned conversations, other times in regular, planned and structured sessions; but spiritual formation and direction should be the ordinary pastoral ministry of every parish and every Christian community'<sup>28</sup>.

### **What Does It Look Like?**

Fullam and Mabry, 2012, discuss the many ways of offering spiritual guidance and how having a working familiarity with a variety of archetypes or styles – and they identify six; saint, coach, companion, soulfriend, guru and confessor, can enhance direction to fit the needs of a directee. For example, some styles are more directive than others and they recognise these may be helpful in times of particular stress where the director can offer ‘a sense of a transcendent universe even if things look pretty bleak, ordinary or pointless’<sup>29</sup>. They balance this by warning against overly directive engagement. Fullam and Mabry make the point by their inclusive approach that there is a rich array of styles as noted before in the blurred picture in history. These are all like taonga waiting in the kete of clergy for the leading of the Spirit. In the case of a priest the style, ‘confessor’ can be very appropriate – providing the work of listening to both the directee and God is done. Both Guenther and Jeff write of the ease of movement to confession and absolution according to the needs and desire of a directee. Guenther explains<sup>30</sup> how she keeps spiritual direction and the sacramental distinct. She says sometimes it is appropriate to say, ‘What you have told me is a confession. I am convinced that you are deeply sorry for these things of your past, indeed contrite. So I would like to offer you absolution’. In priestly direction, Jeff<sup>31</sup> suggests that where ‘a close relationship develops with the director, this is the best place for the pronouncement of absolution.’ It depends a lot on the tradition in which the directee is comfortable. Such are the resources and opportunities of clergy when ministry is exercised with understanding of roles and boundaries and all are offered while listening to the Holy Spirit on behalf of the parishioner.

### **Centrality**

Spiritual direction and guidance is central to the work of pastoral ministry and an essential function of all clergy. Peterson sees ‘more and more pastors are seizing this old identity and making it their own, refusing any longer to let it be marginal to their ministries. This is to take seriously what we already know are serious matters – a sign of grace here, a desire for

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<sup>28</sup>Leech, 2001, pxvii

<sup>29</sup>Fullam & Mabry, 2012, p37

<sup>30</sup> Guenther, 1993, p30

<sup>31</sup> Jeff, 1987, p24

<sup>31</sup> Peterson, 1987, p154

prayer there – and shape the agenda of our work from the souls of people we meet<sup>32</sup>. Clerical responsibility for the *cure of souls* can be shared, it can be delegated but it cannot be abdicated. To do so is to abandon precious soil entrusted by no less than the owner of the vineyard. We do certainly walk on holy ground in the *cure of souls*. It is to be hoped that clergy will increasingly hear the call of Evelyn Underhill across the centuries to companion souls as they respond to the touch of the Holy One.

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