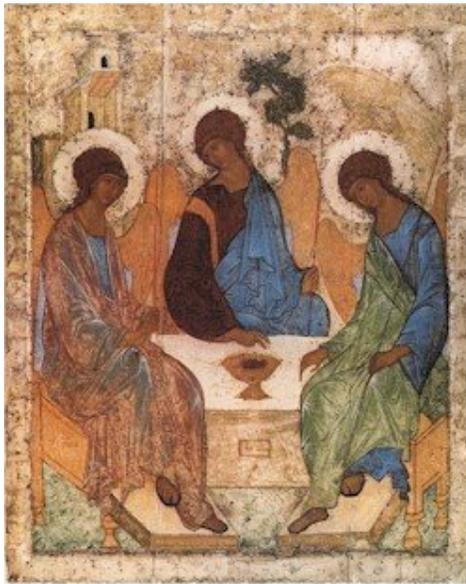


Spiritual Direction By Email For Missionaries In Isolated Places: An Initial Exploration

by

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“For where two or three are gathered together in My Name,
there am I among them.”

The words of Jesus in Matthew 18:20

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

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Introduction

Christian teaching places significant emphasis on The Word. In Genesis, God speaks and Creation bursts into life.¹ In Hebrews we read that “the world was created by the Word of God.”² Jesus Himself is often referred to as “The Word of God.”³ Words are potent; they can carry the voice of God and the transforming life of the Spirit. As spiritual directors we know and affirm this – we see the power of the Word at work.

How do we share God’s Word? Is the face-to-face spoken word the only way, or even the best way in all circumstances? As I have been challenged and changed through God’s Word coming to me in spiritual direction, I have often mused “I wish I had known some of this when I served overseas” and then asked “How can I share this means of grace with those who would find it most helpful in their walk with God, i.e. the missions community?” And so I have embarked on this research paper and the opportunity to explore some of these issues.

The bulk of this research has been gathered from questionnaires sent out to two different groups of people:

- Spiritual Directors (through the ACSD⁴ list)
- Missionaries (through a number of different agencies).

A further questionnaire was sent to individuals from both groups who replied and expressed willingness for additional dialogue. The compilation of these responses amounts to some 30 pages.

¹ Genesis 1

² Hebrews 11:3

³ John 1:1; Revelation 19:13

⁴ Association of Christian Spiritual Directors of Aotearoa New Zealand

Of the 169 questionnaires sent out to the ACSD list 94 responded, some just to register n/a or a brief “Have no experience of this, but sounds like a good idea”. I also received a few unsolicited responses from those who heard about my research. The following conclusions have been reached from the 56 who gave significant input; and in particular those who answered the follow-up questionnaire on possible models for spiritual direction by email.

This is a summary of my findings, however for those who wish to glean more the complete details are available.⁵ There is an initial statistic that is worth recording at this point though, one that shows the generous encouragement and general enthusiasm for the idea:

- 61% of the respondents considered the idea of spiritual direction by email to be excellent/very helpful
- 32% considered it good/helpful/useful
- 7% conceded it better than nothing despite the difficulties.

In total this is a positive response from 93% of the spiritual directors who answered. As one noted, “This is surely an idea whose time has come.”

To distribute the missionary questionnaire I contacted 16 Protestant agencies (my observation is that the Catholics often have different systems in place for their missionaries), firstly by phone before sending the questionnaire for evaluation and/or changes with a request to distribute it to their field workers. The responses ranged from “Spiritual what?” and “No thank you, we take very good care of our missionaries” to a widespread acknowledgement that member care is vital to the well-being and retention of missionaries, and a willingness to help gather information targeting this aim.

⁵ margarettooley@hotmail.com

My data is general and does not include information linking individuals to particular agencies or missions. There is certainly more fruitful work to be done by gathering responses from a broader cross-section of the missionary community.

Despite these caveats I received enough feedback from over 40 missionaries to believe that there is not only a felt-need but also a real enthusiasm for the whole idea of spiritual direction by email as a tool for nurture and effective care of God's "front-line troops" serving in some of the hardest places of the earth.

The Scenario

Consider the situation of these heroes, willingly giving up extended family relationships, material security, the comforts of home, even physical safety because of their love for God and His lost world. They have usually been successful in ministry at home – as pastors, youth leaders, teachers, doctors etc. – competent in their expertise, carrying inherent spiritual authority, and enjoying wide respect. Suddenly they are thrust into an alien world where they are very "not-competent" and have to begin to earn respect. The culture is different and often strange, the language is different and often strange, the people are different – everything is strange.⁶ There is a myriad of problems to be solved, from "Where do we send the children to school?" to "What is the use of this tap if no water comes out?" From being a competent part of the majority, they are now a very incompetent minority. They are used to achieving, and frequently have high – even unreal – expectations of themselves.⁷ Now achievement is slow or awkward, and their own expectations go unmet. Yes, there are those who can help - the missionaries already there. But often they are too busy with their own projects, and

⁶ A missionary writes "we do see that the first casualty of tiredness, culture shock, busy-ness and the realities of living in a new country is spiritual health"

having settled in, found their niche, and made the foreign culture their home it is easy to be unaware of the newcomers' plight.⁸

All of this has huge implications for the missionary's personal walk with Christ – concepts like image of God, sense of God, self-worth. These are difficult issues to bring to colleagues at the best of times, let alone when one is feeling vulnerable and using a great deal of effort just to cope during this enormous life-transition. To have someone, sympathetic and objective, ask the classic spiritual direction question “Where is God for you in this situation?” could have huge benefits.

Having created the context for the new missionary, let's think about the veteran (a hypothetical composite, but certainly not an unrealistic portrait). He or she is often a self-starter, used to taking initiative, responsibility, keeping on keeping on, disregarding feelings, work-oriented, goal-focused, growth-driven, self-contained and strong. One morning he awakes and realises he is dry, burnt-out and running on empty.⁹ This moment of self-revelation can be so frightening in its implications for himself, his family, his work and his future that it is easier to ignore it, crank himself up to a new level of resolution and keep going.

Who can he speak to? After all, he is the strong one who holds everything together, and has now added to his load an extra burden of guilt that it is not meant to be like this (“Where is the abundant life that Jesus promises?”) and somehow he must have failed.

⁷ Dixon, Janice *Unrealistic Expectations: The Downfall of Many Missionaries* (Evangelical Missions Quarterly Vol.26, No.4)

⁸ A friend, before coming back to NZ on furlough took a camera to her “home” Indian city to find items of interest. She returned without taking a shot, saying – “everything just looks normal”

Who *can* he speak to? His colleagues? His work supervisor? His sending church? Friends back home? Not likely! God Himself? Perhaps not - how do you talk to a God you think you have failed?

Of course this is only a partial picture, and not the whole, but it is certainly representative of many who are walking this road. And it is revealing that my most enthusiastic respondents were former missionaries who had subsequently trained in spiritual direction and realised how profoundly they would have benefited from such a relationship when they were on the field. So how could spiritual directors be of service?

A Solution

Could we be someone

- whose sole purpose in the relationship is to promote spiritual health and well-being
- who can listen with loving attention
- who can ask perceptive questions that gently lead to knowing self and knowing God
- who won't try to "fix" things but walk alongside in a purposeful, safe acceptance.
- who will bring a security with "mystery" and not feel a need to come up with an answer for everything
- who will help the movement from finding the "God of the work" to "God in the work"

⁹ One of my respondents, a missionary doctor, notes... "I have seen very solid people struggling with depression, overwork and spiritual dryness which they have a hard time sharing with others either on the field or at home."

How do we define spiritual direction in this context, or can we call it spiritual direction at all? Perhaps we have become so used to the face-to-face model that we regard other types as unworkable, or inherently inferior. And yet classic spiritual direction was often offered by letter, beginning with the New Testament letters of Paul, John and Peter to churches and individuals. Down through the centuries this method has served St. John of the Cross,¹⁰ Teresa of Avila,¹¹ as well as Francis de Sales,¹² Fenelon,¹³ Luther and many others. Some of the collected letters of C. S. Lewis¹⁴ fit into this category, and who knows how many of our contemporaries are presently engaged in a correspondence which could well be published under the category of spiritual direction. Seen in this light, spiritual direction by email becomes the up-dating of an ancient tool with the keyboard replacing the pen, and the screen substituting for paper.

But perhaps it is still necessary to define spiritual direction in this context more broadly and loosely – perhaps something along the line of Eugene Peterson’s suggestion of “the prayerful attention that we give to another person as a spiritual being, and the accompanying prayerful conversation”¹⁵ that develops. This is the sort of conversation that is not limited by time or distance. So, practically speaking, how could this work, what sort of model could we use?

I found over 20 respondents who were using or had used email for spiritual direction (as well as about 10 by phone and/or letter). All found it valuable. Although most were an extension of a previous spiritual direction relationship, some began solely on the recommendation of a

¹⁰ Rodriguez, Otilo, translator, *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*, (ICS Publications, Washington D. C 1991).

¹¹ Kavanaugh, Kieran, *The Collected Letters of St. Teresa of Avila*, (ICS Publications, Washington D.C., 2001).

¹² De Sales, Francis, Power, Joseph F & Wright, Wendy M, *Francis De Sales, Jane De Chantal: Letters of Spiritual Direction* (Paulist Press Mahwah, N.J., 1998).

¹³ *Fenelon's spiritual letters* (Christian books, Ca, USA, 1982).

¹⁴ e.g. Lewis, C.S., *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (Harcourt, Brace & World, NY, 1964).

¹⁵ Peterson, Eugene: *Take and Read: An Annotated List*: (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI 1995)P.39

mutual friend; other relationships had been set up by missionaries prior to their field assignment, and in one case the directee had wanted to remain anonymous and faceless until she felt more secure. The format varied widely from very informal to highly structured, with the constant imperative being that whatever format is used it needs to be clearly negotiated, understood, adhered to, and periodically assessed.

Beginning A large majority of the missionaries were quite certain that they did not want to begin this category of spiritual friendship with a phone-call. A recommendation from a friend was considered helpful, but the most natural process is a continuation of a relationship begun during furlough or a visit. Alongside this however were comments like “I can’t wait that long” or “That is too far away.” It is obvious that a sense of need is one of the most motivating factors and with thought, prayer and sensitivity a sacred relationship can begin “cold.”¹⁶ The first session then would be “getting to know you” – a time for getting acquainted with a brief exchange of biographical details of family, life experience, training, callings, giftings, sense of journey – much as one would do in an initial face to face meeting. If this seems too intense, it could be accomplished by brief emails shared each week for the first month covering this information.

It is also a useful practise for the director to receive the regular newsletters (increasingly available by email) that many missionaries circulate with general news about their ministry as well as items for prayer.

Frequency This issue of flexibility in both director and directee is a crucial factor when considering frequency of contact. Missionaries living in cities with access to private and

¹⁶ Confirmed by personal experience

reliable email can work within a more regular framework. Patience and care needs to be taken to find a frequency that is desirable and effective for both participants with the aim being to create as natural a flow of communication as possible. This requires a willingness to experiment and adjust.

Other missionaries with assignments taking them to isolated regions for up to 3 months at a time could engage in an intensive email conversation in the weeks when they are at their home base.

Then there are those living in restricted access (RA) countries where governments monitor email, and it is difficult to think of a satisfactory spiritual direction relationship taking place through coded words. This is beyond the scope of this assignment, and here I am assuming that both parties have access to secure and private email. However a couple of points are worth noting concerning RA countries: with some creativity encryption is an option; and the experts tell me that safe and simple devices are not too far away that will solve the problems of privacy and confidentiality. It is also true that many of these missionaries do “come out” to a safe location periodically for a week or two, and could use this time for focused reflection with a spiritual director.

Content It is not only the structure that requires flexibility, but also the content. This may have something to do with personality, but I found missionaries gave very different responses to the possible conversation opener.¹⁷ Some wanted a pro forma checklist¹⁸ that they could answer, for others this was too much like work, a sort of being “checked up on”.

¹⁷ See Appendix C for missionary questionnaire.

¹⁸ One internet-based SD ministry has an example that can be found at <http://sdiheartland.org/preparation.html>, See Appendix E. A unique and specialised list could be created for each directee (coming up with this would be very useful for defining SD and discussing expectations)

Another group were comfortable with more classic spiritual direction questions like

“What signs of grace have you seen in the last month?”

"What image or metaphor best describes what God is like for you at present?"

and yet another group wanted the freedom to be able to respond to a very casual question like

“How are things going for you?”¹⁹

The important thing is to define clearly what each person needs and expects from the companioning relationship.

Format Again, I found a wide variety, coinciding with the different formats used by those who are doing spiritual direction by email. Some wanted a very formal process going something like this:

Director initiates/*Missionary responds*

Director replies/*Missionary comments*

Director closes

OR

Missionary writes/Director answers and reflects

Missionary responds

OR

Many variations of this theme.

All of this can take place within a week and so fit into a cycle. Most of those doing spiritual direction by email found that contact in this formal model worked well every 4 – 6 weeks.

¹⁹ Some found the vagueness of this question “too much like work” and would rather have a check-list

Other missionaries wanted to initiate contact solely on an “as needed” basis. This concept was not too popular with directors who felt that it would lack the needed accountability. It could also create the tendency to treat direction as a “crisis line” or “problem solving” rather than the regular commitment of sharing a journey together. Even so, this could be very helpful in supplying the immediate felt-need of the missionary, and could easily, with a skilful director’s gentle listening and questioning, grow into a more classic spiritual direction relationship.

Overcoming Extra Opportunities for Miscommunication

Timing The ideal arrangement would suggest that the director respond to the missionary email within a certain time frame – say 24hrs. – with an acknowledgement of receipt²⁰, with the spiritual direction email to follow within a prearranged time frame – say 1 or 2 days. Otherwise there is a tendency to imagine that one has said something unacceptable, or too difficult, or hurtful. This presupposes that both parties will know when the other is away or out of email contact.

Manner Barry & Connolly talk about “a surplus of warmth”²¹ as a pre-requisite for a companionable relationship. By definition, email communication tends to be brief, to the point and often work-related. With thought and imagination this can be overcome. When we served in the Philippines two of our boys used the NZ Correspondence School. Even though we never met, their teachers became warm personable friends through letters, notes, and various items they sent. Many of the spiritual directors responding to my questionnaire did so with a warmth that left me smiling at the computer and thinking “I hope we can meet some day - I really like you.”

²⁰ usually a normal function on most email programmes

²¹ Barry & Connolly, *The Practise of Spiritual Direction*, (San Francisco: HarperCollins,1981) P.126

The Limitations of Words

With some email formats we can use pictures , emoticons 🤔, CAPS, *italics*, colour and fonts to express our feelings,²² and we always have the benefit of reading, re-reading and re-reading our words before we send them off with a prayer that they will bring God's voice. The directee can also learn to use these tools quite intuitively before asking themselves "Why did I use that colour?" etc. This does go some way towards "reading between the lines" and compensating for the lack of face-to-face contact with its inherent advantages of tone, pause, and body language. In some situations low-cost phone calls could be used to complement the e-mail. Other conversations could take place on Instant Messaging or Chat-Rooms, assuming adequate technology and material that does not need to be confidential.

Language and cultural differences

Different words mean different things to different people, and we need to recognise that, even with all possible care taken in choosing words and phrases, misunderstandings will almost certainly arise. With this recognition, there needs to be a constant openness to welcome questions and requests for clarification and explanation, along with a tenacity in addressing these issues and assuming the goodwill of the other.

²² Missionaries are amongst the most tech-savvy people I know. Some of them would delight in this opportunity.

A Look At Some Key Differences

<i>Face-to-face direction</i>	<i>Email direction</i>
Body language, tone, emotion etc. are huge aids in discernment and understanding	Body language can be distracting, or even misinterpreted*. Its absence in email direction avoids these pitfalls.
Spontaneity for directee	Being forced to think about what to write prompts more intentional reflection
Spontaneity for director	Can weigh, evaluate, sift, pray, consider before responding
The immediacy of a conversation	In the “pause” of waiting, there is an opportunity for God to work **
Talking is easier than writing	Writing becomes a sort of compulsory journaling with all the accompanying benefits.
A conversation is transient – gone as soon as it happens	There is a written record for reflection and prayer
Lack of continuity	Easy to pick up threads and assess development through written record (agreement necessary on this – some may want to destroy emails)
Intentional total focus on directee	More mutuality and sharing in email companionship
Director reflects words back to directee	An opportunity for God’s revelation through re-reading own words***
Avoidance of “chat”	An intentional and deliberate prioritising of issues
Options limited by geography	A huge widening of options with locality, transport etc. irrelevant
Flexibility can mean neglect when not a regular appointment	Flexibility means expanded options for timing (e.g. midnight in pyjamas!)
Boundaries easily set in the relationship	With help just a mouse-click away, more discipline is needed to respect boundaries ****

* “...neither of us had to...read into facial expressions or body language what may very well not have been there.”²³

** “...what at first seemed problematic became helpful. In waiting for a response I found time to reflect. The waiting resulted in understanding, gaining insight, and ultimately the beginning of my transformation.”²⁴

²³ Estella, Jeanne & Heuer, Andre, *Spiritual Direction in Cyberspace: (Presence: the Journal of Spiritual Directors International, Vol. 3 No. 2 May 1997) P. 39*

*** “Using line-by-line response brought me back to my own words and my own life: it opened my eyes as I saw my own words reflected back to me. Many times I couldn’t believe I said those words...”²⁵

**** “There is a need to set limits. It is easy to send 2, 3 or more email messages a day. At times I find the need to slow the pace. It is important to be clear about the amounts of correspondence that is desirable and effective. Each companioning relationship is different. Once a week, occasional exchanges, daily, or haphazard are all patterns I use. Amount and pace of correspondence needs to be worked out by the participants in a way that suits the needs of both.”²⁶

For many missionaries the benefits of email spiritual direction would certainly compensate for the limitations and disadvantages. The following list gives many of the many advantages raised: ²⁷

- continuous support
- “I won’t feel so alone”
- “help me to face issues that I would rather avoid”
- someone whose primary focus is my spiritual walk (crawl, stumble, run etc.)
- objectivity – someone outside the group
- an accountability with self-care which is often neglected through constant giving out, and little input
- safety and understanding in sharing doubts, failures, difficulties, dark times²⁸ - described as “lifesaving”

²⁴ *ibid.* P.44

²⁵ *ibid.* P.39

²⁶ *ibid.* P.45

²⁷ the original list is over 3 pages long

²⁸ Most communication has to be couched in positive terms for supporters, sending churches, agencies etc. See Frederick Kosin’s book “*Letters Missionaries Never Write.*”

- a sense of connectedness to the wider Christian world
- recommendations of books, resources
- availability as needed
- regular spiritual input
- encouragement – N.B. to give courage
- connection to passport country
- support for the transition back to passport country
- “a good reminder of things I know but may not be making the time to do”
- spiritual freshness
- discovering God in the midst of strange and new experiences
- finding God in situations where there is much change, loss, and lack of security

Two things came through very strongly from the missionary responses: a desire for spiritual growth, and a recognition that it is easy to “run dry” and not know how to find the necessary refreshing. In response to the question “Would you be willing to “trial” such a relationship for 6 months, over half answered simply “Yes.”

What sort of person would missionaries find it easiest to relate to? Usually the same gender, about the same age or older, with a similar life experience. It is interesting to note that generally theological considerations²⁹ were not as important as someone who

- is a good listener
- can establish warmth and friendship
- understands the complexities and pressures of life on the mission field³⁰

²⁹ not true for everyone of course, and there was an assumption of an orthodox, Biblical faith. Some expressed a preference for enough theological difference to bring another perspective.

³⁰ e.g. one respondent wrote “a woman functioning in a conservative Islamic context, the spiritual warfare component with devil worship etc., the draining effect of battling with inefficient and corrupt bureaucracies.”

- has a deep prayer ministry
- doesn't have a particular agenda
- is a seeker after God themselves
- has had their faith sufficiently challenged and thought-through not to give "pat" or easy answers
- is unafraid to look at the hard questions of life and spirituality
- is devoted to the Lord
- is non-judgmental, encouraging and honest

For many missionaries it was essential for the director to have had missionary experience, or at least some first-hand understanding of life in a cross-cultural situation. If this gift of a spiritual director is "a gift of accompaniment, insight, interpretation and communion"³¹ then this is of vital importance.

There were also benefits mentioned for the director including:

- educating the director about life as a Christian in another culture and context
- a continuation of the "missionary call" for directors who have served overseas
- the privilege of serving those whose lives are poured out in ministry to others
- an outward link to the wider Christian world

³¹ Morris, Thomas, *Gifted for the Journey: the Art of Spiritual Direction*
http://www.worship.ca/docsp_41_tm.html

Some Of The Unique Difficulties Inherent In Email Spiritual Direction

The computer

- Confidentiality: are both connections secure and private? It may be necessary to create alternative forms of communication (e.g. by letter or phone call) when absolute confidentiality is necessary.
- Can I entrust my deepest thoughts to a machine?
- Do I keep the emails, or print them out?³²
- This is my “work” tool and I find it cold, impersonal and unfriendly.

Work and Word

- It can easily feel like one more task, another item on the “to do” list, another report to write, another expectation to meet, another duty to fulfil.
- It presupposes an ease with writing about personal issues. Although some may find this easier than face-to-face direction, others would struggle.

Most of these difficulties are solved simply by the sense of need (or as one missionary wrote “my desperation”) that actively seeks solutions. And missionaries are well-practised experts at adapting and finding solutions – even if they are less than ideal. The person who feels the need keenly will certainly discover ways to make it work.

Relationships

- Trust is a huge issue in any close relationship. How much harder when we have only the words on a page? If we think of this as a companionship, and lose some of the

³² Something to be decided in the agreement between the two parties

hierarchical aspects of the director/directee relationship then the sharing becomes more mutual, and more personal. An experienced director, Andre Heuer writes “I find mutual personal sharing opens the way for the directee to share and to trust. It helps through modelling, to encourage the personal nature of the spiritual quest.”³³

- Emotional and/or spiritual dependence. With the less hierarchical and more mutual relationship implied in email spiritual direction, care must be taken to observe proper boundaries. Once again understanding the aims and focus of direction is of primary importance, i.e. direction is not about counselling, or coaching or “fixing.” Some respondents spoke of the danger of using direction as a “crutch” and not pursuing personal spiritual disciplines. Gerald May notes that “people often strive to substitute relationship with each other for the most threatening parts of their relationship with God.”³⁴ Here, the definition of spiritual direction as “directing someone to God” is particularly helpful. The director/companion does not become the prayer-partner/consultant that the directee relies on and checks in with, but the faithful asker of questions who consistently points and directs to Jesus. It is the director’s role to encourage the individual’s intimate relationship with God, not dilute or lessen it in any way.
- Lack of understanding from colleagues. Much stress and distress can be caused through relationship conflicts on the mission field – should we really be surprised? After all, because of the very nature of their work and environment missionaries are often subjected to the influence of dark spiritual forces, as well as afflicted with the common humanity we all share. If a colleague, leader, supervisor, or even a spouse feels that private issues and conflicts are being raised and the SD is acting as a confidante or giving advice into mission matters, then such misunderstandings will

³³ Estella, Jeanne & Heuer, Andre, *Spiritual Direction in Cyberspace*, (Presence: the Journal of Spiritual

inevitably aggravate the situation. Consequently there needs to be a very clear understanding and appreciation for all those involved in what spiritual direction is and is not, and an extremely conscientious and careful discipline on the part of the director to uphold the broader trust and keep to the subject: What is God's invitation to you in these circumstances?

- Transference and counter-transference. Andre Heuer has a particular interest in the psychological issues raised by the use of the internet and comments that it is important to be aware of this process of projection and transference. Noting that "imagination fills the gaps where the sensory data is missing" he writes "The process of communicating over the Internet with its built-in lack of physical presence, I believe, actually intensifies the experience of transference and projection, which then need to be discussed and worked through carefully and thoughtfully."³⁵ The slower pace of email direction helps both parties deal with transference issues as well as giving time for prayer and reflection.

The Cost

Although many of the directors surveyed were happy to offer their services free of charge, the clear majority recognised the need and opportunity to involve those who send and support missionaries. Purely on a cost/benefit basis two or three hundred dollars a year is a small price to pay in the war against missionary attrition,³⁶ much of which happens because of spiritual need. Many agencies are aware of the challenges, but know little of spiritual

Directors International, Vol. 3 No. 2 May 1997) P. 38

³⁴ May, Gerald, *Care of Mind, Care of Spirit*, (HarperCollins, San Francisco, 1982, 1992) P.132

³⁵ Estella, Jeanne, Heuer, Andre, *Spiritual Direction in Cyberspace*, (Presence: the Journal of Spiritual Directors International, Vol. 3 No. 2 May 1997) P. 43

³⁶ A survey of 453 sending societies across 14 nations found an annual attrition rate of 5.1%. Of that 3.1% was "undesirable" because it is premature, preventable and likely permanent. In real person terms this is a number of around 12,000 each year Kelly O'Donnell: *Member Care Conference, February 2002*. See also *Too Valuable to Lose* by William Taylor (Pasadena CA: William Carey Library 1997)

direction and the benefits it can provide.³⁷ I found a few agencies that help with payment for spiritual direction while the missionary is on furlough; some use letters and phone-calls for direction, and still others encourage their workers to find someone on the field with whom they can relate and share. With the goodwill I found while doing this project I have no doubt that, with a concrete proposal, and good systems in place for integrity and supervision,³⁸ funds could be raised for this purpose through

- individual supporters
- the sending church
- the denominational missions budget
- the mission agency.

I end with some direct quotes from God's heroes – serving with love and devotion in challenging circumstances. They suggest the great cost of *not* providing for this ministry.

“Spot on! Just what I’ve been looking for.”

“It would be a life-saver.”

“...An answer to a question I have not been able to formulate, and a prayer that I have not been able to verbalise”

“It has to work – in many cases there is no other option.”

³⁷ One field worker notes “I suspect we would cut a lot of problems in the field if we did.” i.e. have individual missionaries connected to a spiritual director

³⁸ e.g. a working relationship with ACSDANZ

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Eugene Peterson talks about "Spirituality for all the wrong reasons"

Journaling sites

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/tcw/2004/003/5.50.html>

Five different ways of journaling for “journaling dropouts”

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Gordon MacDonald talks about journaling as “a way to bring your soul into focus”

Retreat sites

<http://regions.ivcf.org/prayer>

Over 40 suggestions for guided reflection and retreats from

“Daily Examination” on Ignatian prayer to “Rendez-vous with God”

Lectio Divina

<http://www.valyermo.com/ld-art.html>

Fr. Luke Dysinger: Accepting the embrace of God: the ancient art of Lectio Divina

<http://www.osb.org/lectio/index.html>

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Holy Spirit interactive: the ancient art of Lectio Divina

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Mission resource sites

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Evangelism and Missions Information service including the Evangelical Missions

Quarterly with many (and growing) archived articles available for free downloading

<http://www.missionfrontiers.org>

Mission Frontiers Magazine with extensive archives

<http://www.missionarycare.com/index.htm>

Site devoted to articles and resources on member care with links to other similar sites

<http://www.missionfrontiers.org/1999/0102/jf9911.htm>

<http://www.missionarycare.com/dbListArticles.asp?topicid=78>

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<http://www.sgm.org.nz/Research%20Papers/Issues%20Facing%20Returning%20Missionaries.doc>

Alison Palmer: Issues Facing Returning Missionaries, and How Spiritual Direction Can Help (SGM Research Paper)

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APPENDIX A

MAKING SPIRITUAL DIRECTION WORK: A PLACE TO BEGIN

A Form for Missionaries to Read and Fill In to Assess Their Needs and Preferences in Spiritual Direction

This is *not* a final statement, but an instrument to provoke thought and prayer, as well as a practical attempt to envisage what a “working alliance”³⁹ for spiritual direction by email might look like. Please add your own comments and observations

Definitions

Although Spiritual Direction inevitably includes aspects of other relationships like mentoring, discipling, counselling, or coaching, it focuses primarily on the directee’s relationship with Christ, and its outworking in everyday of life. Here is a simple and useful definition: “In spiritual direction a spiritual director helps a person pay attention to the movements of God in his/her life and to live out the consequences of that deepening relationship.”

What would this involve?

The Missionary’s part/role/responsibility: To be aware of movements within his/her own life, e.g. of words, phrases or images that speak through the Scriptures, nature (sometimes called “God’s other book”), circumstances, the words or attitudes of others, prayer life, significant dreams, the awareness – or lack of awareness - of God’s presence; and to take note of these. The Missionary (**M**) is in control of the agenda, the content that is shared, and is able to say at any time “I would rather not talk about that now” with no sense of condemnation or judgment.

Spiritual Director’s part/role/responsibility: To pray regularly for **M**, to listen attentively, to enable and encourage **M** to go deeper in their awareness of God, to help **M** “connect the dots”, to discover God in the everyday, and discern His loving presence and purposes in the whole of life. And to hold the relationship before God as sacred and confidential.

It is imperative that both parties have a clear and well-defined understanding of the relationship, how it works, and what each party expects of the other. The following list covers the major areas and is designed to be a starting-point to provoke other issues, thought, prayer and discussion.

Computer issues

Is your connection reliable? private?

Are you able to print out attachments etc?

Is it feasible for you to access web-based text resources? Pictures and images?

³⁹ A phrase used by William A. Barry and William J. Connolly in their classic text “The Practise of Spiritual Direction” to describe the relationship between director and directee.

Are you able to format emails with **colour**, **bold**, *fonts*, etc?

Do you wish both parties to be able to keep SD emails? delete them?

delete after a period of time? (please specify, e.g. 3 months, 6 months, 1 yr.)

Comments:

Resources

Do you have access to Christian books? library? Christian magazines?

Beginning

Do you sense God calling you to a relationship of spiritual direction and companionship?

Do you want to begin this

a) during your next visit to N.Z b) now, while you are on the field

If b) how would you want to begin?

By a friend's recommendation introductory phone call regular letter email

Comments:

Personal issues

Check the qualities you consider desirable.

Theological. (Bear in mind that SD is not a didactic ministry, and some prefer a director with enough "difference" to bring another perspective. A biblical, orthodox theology is basic to the Association of Christian Spiritual Directors).

Anglican Reformed Catholic Charismatic Pentecostal Evangelical

Baptist Post-denominational (Check as many as you wish!)

Comments:

Personality

Do you want to be linked with someone similar or different to you?

Please explain briefly:

Have you done the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator? If so, do you remember your 4-letter type? (E.g. INTJ, ESFP)

If not, consider these qualities, and mark what you think best applies to you in each pair. There are no right, wrong or preferred answers:

I re-energise: outwardly with others inwardly and alone

I gather information: through intuitiveness through my five senses

I make decisions: based on objective thought based on subjective feeling for myself and others

My approach to life is: generally organised flexible and open-ended

Comments:

Life experience

What qualities are important to you in a director/companion? Please check all that apply.

Has theological training Is in the ministry

Has travelled/ worked overseas Has served on the mission-field

Married Unmarried Has children

Do you prefer someone about the same age older than you

The same gender opposite gender

Comments:

Frequency

Does your work allow you to have a regular email contact?

If so, how often would you like to “meet”? monthly every 6 weeks every 2 months

If your work demands more flexibility how often could you be in contact?

There are lots of possibilities here to cater for different schedules and assignments; e.g. daily for a week every 3 months, or weekly for a month every 6 months. Please consider what would work best for you.

As able and aware of need (Not highly recommended – especially at the beginning since

SD is not a “crisis line” but an on-going relationship of spiritual friendship).

Comments:

Format

Getting to Know You

If a regular frequency is possible then the first month could be spent in exchanging brief emails each week for three or four weeks. This would give time to exchange a brief “bio” on both sides and to focus on the particular callings and giftings of **M**. A month later the more specific SD relationship could begin, say on the 1st of each month or whatever is most suitable. Of course there are lots of variations possible here – the main thing is to be aware of them and talk about them, e.g. the same purpose could be accomplished by alternating daily contact for a week if the missionary’s work involved being out of email contact for significant periods of time.

Comments:

The process

Who initiates contact? Missionary or Director

A couple of Models:

- Director initiates/Missionary responds/Director replies/Missionary comments/Director closes *or*
- Missionary writes/Director answers and reflects/Missionary responds *or*
- any of many workable variations on this theme.

Please indicate what you think would work best for you.

All of this can take place within a week and so fit into a cycle. Of those presently doing this type of direction, most found that contact in this model worked well every 4 – 6 weeks. To prevent misunderstanding, it is advisable to use “read receipts” in email programmes, so that both parties know the other has picked up the message; it is also vital to keep each other informed when schedules and assignments prevent computer access.

Comments:

Content

There are two basic approaches here, again with scope for lots of variation.

The Formal Approach

This could be a checklist that **M** works through each month in preparation. A sample could look something like this:

- What signs of grace have I seen in the last month?
- What image or metaphor best describes what God is like for me at present?
- How is my prayer changing?
- What is God saying to me in my Scripture reading/meditation times?
- When am I most aware of God?
- When am I least aware of God?
- Where do I sense God is calling me to growth?
- What is God’s invitation to me in my present circumstances?
- What more of Himself is Jesus offering to me at present?

M would then have the freedom to choose which particular question and concern is the “burning” one that the Holy Spirit is highlighting at this particular time

OR

M could come up with a series of questions they would like to be asked each month as a spiritual discipline to monitor their own growth and spiritual progress.

The Informal Approach

This could be any number of simple, open questions like:

“How are things going?”

“Is there anything you would like to talk about?”

OR

a flexible format in which **M** makes contact on an “as needed” basis, taking the initiative for contact and content.

Comments:

Continuing ...

As with any spiritual direction relationship, it is wise to regularly review the process with questions like:

Is this working for me?

How could it be more helpful?

Do I sense the Holy Spirit at work in our conversations?

A first review could come after six months and then again at the end of the year with a question like: Do I sense God inviting me to continue this relationship?

Comments:

The missionary director needs to know they are “in charge” of the situation, and cultivate an openness in expressing how they feel the relationship is progressing, to request change, stop for a period, or even end the relationship if it is not helpful (realising at the same time that all relationships go through difficulties and a trial period of one-year is perhaps a basic minimum). Obviously the ideal situation is to begin a spiritual direction relationship while on furlough – the email conversation then just becomes a continuation of something already in place.

The director maintains a stance of service, trusting **M** to understand their needs with structure and format as well as content.

Further comments:

I am aware that all this appears to be rather daunting and perhaps seems unnecessary in its scope and detail. The purpose is to clear away all possible misunderstanding, so that the relationship can be positive, open and free to focus on God and discern the voice of the Spirit. May God bless you as you discern His calling.

APPENDIX B

The Questionnaire sent to Spiritual Directors on the ACSDANZ⁴⁰ list.

To explore the possibility of Spiritual Direction as a tool for supporting and encouraging missionaries in geographical or emotional/spiritual isolation.

1. What do you think of the idea of providing spiritual direction by email for missionaries?
2. What benefits would you identify in providing spiritual direction by email for missionaries?
3. What difficulties would you identify in providing spiritual direction by email?
4. How would you envisage spiritual direction by email working?
5. Have you had any experience of giving or receiving SD by email?
6. Are you presently involved in any SD relationships via email?
7. What positives have you discovered in this method?
8. What are the difficulties?
9. How did you begin? (Meeting while on furlough, telephone conversation, or just “cold”)
10. What structure do you use?
11. How often do you communicate?
12. What does SD by email require of you that is different from regular SD?
13. What does SD by email require of the directee that is different?
14. How might the matter or reimbursement for time and expertise be handled?
 - a. A sum of money paid in advance while on furlough?
 - b. The director’s gift of love w/out monetary reimbursement?
 - c. “Sponsorship” from a supporter of the missionary?
 - d. Other possible ideas?
15. If you are presently involved in SD by email, would you be willing for further questions/advice?

⁴⁰ Association of Christian Spiritual Directors of Aotearoa New Zealand

APPENDIX C

The Questionnaire sent to Missionaries either directly or through a mission agency

How can the church utilise spiritual direction to provide spiritual support and nurture for “front-line troops” on the mission field? Ex-field workers with long-time involvement in missions have often observed – and felt - that one of the greatest unmet needs for missionaries is for effective spiritual support. Studies prove the point - an annual attrition rate of 5.1% which accounts for some 12,000 plus missionaries lost each year to the cause of world missions. (*Kelly O’Donnell: Member Care Conference, February 2002*). Often the “work” needs are met by agencies, but the more personal needs go unmet. Within a tight-knit mission community seeking to express the life and ministry of Jesus there is often a felt-need for someone from completely outside the situation with no agenda to be a listening ear and spiritual companion. Such companioning is an ancient Christian practise called spiritual direction which is currently receiving much attention from all branches of the church. Although it inevitably includes aspects of other relationships (like mentoring, counselling etc.) its preoccupation is the directee’s relationship with Christ, and its outworking in every facet of life. Definitions abound – but here is a useful one:

“In spiritual direction a spiritual director helps a person pay attention to the movements of God/grace in his/her life and to live out the consequences of that deepening relationship.”

Can this “being alongside” happen by email and so provide a service for God’s faithful servants in “hard” places? Members of the Association of Christian spiritual directors here in New Zealand are being contacted to find out who is presently ministering in this way to learn from their understanding and experience. The intention and goal of this present research is to see this means of grace, support and prayer provided to those who would most value it by those best equipped to give it.

1. Do you have access to a reliable, private internet connection?
2. What resources do you currently use for spiritual nurturing?
3. Would you welcome a relationship of spiritual companioning centred on spiritual growth, encouragement and awareness of Jesus in the everyday?
4. What would you need to begin such a relationship?
 - a. to meet the person – eg. on furlough
 - b. to have an initial long-distance phone call
 - c. a recommendation from a friend
 - d. other suggestions

5. What qualities and expertise would you consider necessary?

- a. Theological considerations? e.g. Anglican Reformed Evangelical Baptist
Charismatic Pentecostal Post-denominational
- b. Personality? e.g. similar/different to you
- c. Gender? same/opposite
- d. Age? approx. the same/older
- e. Other?

6. Where do you think the difficulties/dangers might lie?

7. What benefits might you receive from this type of spiritual support?

8. Would you be willing to “trial” such a relationship for 6 months?

9. Do you have other comments/questions?

10. Would you be available in a continuing email conversation to explore further questions and ideas about spiritual direction by email?

APPENDIX D

Sent to both Directors and Missionaries who expressed willingness for further dialogue.

A Look At Models for Spiritual Direction by email

The Missionary: To be aware of movements within his/her own life – of things that speak through the Scriptures, the world around them, the words or attitudes of others, their own prayer life, awareness of God’s presence, significant dreams – and to take note of these – particularly in a journal. **M** is *always* in control of the agenda, the content that is shared, and can say at any time “I would rather not talk about that now” without any sense of condemnation or judgement.

Spiritual Companion: To pray regularly (ideally daily) for **M**, to not seek their own agenda, or get side-tracked by their own stuff, but through gentle questioning *enable and encourage* **M** to go deeper in their awareness of God, to “connect the dots”, to find God in the everyday and discern His loving Person and purposes in the whole of life. And to hold the relationship before God as sacred and confidential.

The usual format for SD is a 1 hour meeting once a month - obviously this is unworkable, and would need to be modified. (Although it is interesting to note that in the past much spiritual direction has occurred through letter-writing – CS Lewis is a 20th century example.) Some isolated missionaries go to a ministry centre once a month to receive SD, but again this is quite different, although it could provide a useful model for those in restricted areas who come “out” periodically.

The first contact could be time together during furlough, a telephone conversation, or a brief email “bio” on both sides and a focus on the callings and giftings of **M**; and then a week later the relationship could begin in a relaxed way with a simple

“How are things going?”

“Is there anything you would like to talk about?”

OR – if **M** were comfortable with this, a more classic SD question like

“What signs of grace have you seen in the last month?”

“What image or metaphor best describes what God is like for you at present?”

“How is your praying changing?”

“What more of Himself is Jesus offering to you?”

and proceed backward and forward for a week each day before taking a 3 week break for **M** to ponder and work through and unpack some of the material covered.

Or it could be something much less structured and looser – a flexible format in which **M** makes contact on an “as needed” basis, taking the initiative for contact and content.

I am very interested in your response to these concepts – whether positive or negative – and any other comments you wish to make. Of course all personal information and identification is held in strictest confidence and trust.

APPENDIX E

The sample form referred to in Footnote 18 of the main text.

Reflection Questions (do as many as you wish)

1. What has been the general spiritual "tone" of your life lately? You might express this in terms of colours, temperature, aromas--anything that helps you to articulate your experience.
2. What events, experiences, relationships, etc. have communicated to you a sense of God's presence?
3. What events, experiences, relationships, etc. have communicated to you a sense of God's absence?
4. Describe your manner of prayer lately. How well does your prayer help you to experience conscious contact with God?
5. What kinds of decisions in your life have you searching for a sense of God's will?
6. In what area of life do you sense God calling you to growth? What can you do to honour this?
7. What kind of feedback would you like at this time from your spiritual director?
8. Anything else you want to talk about?