

**THE PLACE AND NATURE OF  
SPIRITUAL DIRECTION FOR  
GENERATION X**

**by**

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### About the author...

*In 1993 Di Woods met with a spiritual director for the first time and has continued to do so ever since. She was 24 years old then, and is now on the point of completing her training as a Spiritual Director.*

# The Place and Nature of Spiritual Direction for Generation X

**“This is what it’s about.  
It’s all about real relationships.”<sup>1</sup>**

## Introduction

In seeking to address the relationship between Generation X (GenX) and spiritual direction, it is important that each of those terms themselves be understood.

Ironically GenX is relatively easy to define, but less easily understood, whilst some might argue that the opposite is true of spiritual direction. By definition, GenX dislike being labelled<sup>2</sup>, but this is the term that has already “stuck” and that many agree will be used in the history books of the future.<sup>3</sup> GenX describes the generation of people born between the early sixties and the early eighties. Every attempt at a precise date differs from the next, however the definition in *Generation X Field Guide and Lexicon* is useful:

1. Those born between 1960 and 1981. A generation characterized by the lack of a specific identity or role within the larger society. The designation was popularized in a book of the same name published in 1990 by Douglas Coupland.
2. A 1960s English paperback about sex, drugs, and rock’n’roll”.<sup>4</sup>

In referring to GenX in this paper, I look particularly at our New Zealand context, but recognise that this generation’s culture is found in most of the industrialised world, and that the true definition of GenX is cultural, rather than chronological.<sup>5</sup>

The term spiritual direction describes a one way relationship, where one party is the “director” and the other a “directee”. Barry and Connolly say it is:

“... help given by one Christian to another which enables that person to pay attention to God’s personal communication to him or her, to respond to this personally communicating God, to grow in intimacy with this God, and to live out the consequences of the relationship.”<sup>6</sup>

With these definitions in place, we can question the place of spiritual direction for GenX, and, if there is one, what nature it might take. This requires a more detailed

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<sup>1</sup> The closing statement in Hahn and Verhaagen, *GenXers After God*, 192.

<sup>2</sup> Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith*, 27.

<sup>3</sup> They are also known as the “thirteensers” in America, where GenX forms the thirteenth generation of Americans, whilst others call them the Baby Busters, since they busted into the domain of the Baby Boomers.

<sup>4</sup> Wesson, *Generation X Field Guide and Lexicon*, 76.

<sup>5</sup> On culture rather than chronology: see Beaudoin, 28.

<sup>6</sup> Barry and Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, 8.

examination of GenX. Who are these “Xers”? What characterises them? How are they to be understood? What is their culture? These will be vital clues for our answers, since it is culture that informs and moulds theology, and in turn our understanding of relationship with God.<sup>7</sup>

## More about Generation X

There is an aloneness<sup>8</sup> and pessimism about GenX.<sup>9</sup> They have grown up being isolated, lonely, independent and suspicious of the promises of their elders. They are “spiritually starved, emotionally traumatized, educationally deprived, condemned to a bleak economic future and robbed of hope that should characterize youth.”<sup>10</sup> No wonder many older people find them hard to relate to, calling them “whiny, cynical, angry, perplexed, tuned out, timid, searching, vegged out – the latest lost generation.”<sup>11</sup>

It must be understood that Xers are as confused by the attitudes of the older generations as vice versa. “The oldies freaked... He [GenXer] was totally confused by people’s reaction. He stuck to his guns because it was meaningful for him to do so.”<sup>12</sup>

Is this simply the latest post-adolescent generation trying to get going? It has been suggested that there are similar patterns in GenX and their grandparents’, “Lost Generation” - both are reactive and ambivalent, both exhibit signs of gnosticism and so on.<sup>13</sup>

I think not.<sup>14</sup> Something far deeper is at work in our society as GenXers have lost faith in science and technology. GenXers grew up on intimate terms with computers and machines, and are thought to constitute one third of those in cyberspace.<sup>15</sup> This has contributed to their non-relational lives, in which they wonder what life is all about and whether it is worth the effort.<sup>16</sup> Here in NZ we are a few years behind the US in cultural patterning, and also the anti nuclear stance of NZ has lessened the extreme despair of our GenXers. For GenXers who grew up in nuclear countries (as I did in the UK) there has always been awareness that there may not be a future. Nothing is certain.

In addition to this uncertainty, GenXers are often insecure in their relationships. Over 40% come from broken families, and three times as many in GenX than in the

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<sup>7</sup> Beaudoin, 176.

<sup>8</sup> Mahedy and Bernardi, *A Generation Alone*, 19.

<sup>9</sup> Codrington, “Generations”, 10.

<sup>10</sup> Mahedy and Bernardi, 25.

<sup>11</sup> Dunn, *The Baby Bust*, x.

<sup>12</sup> Apokis, “Have You Met the New Audience?”, 3. This was in response to the subject wearing a t-shirt to church that quoted the Young Ones saying “Piss off you bastards.”

<sup>13</sup> Mabry, “The Gnostic Generation”, 39-43.

<sup>14</sup> 77% of the respondents to my survey also thought not: see Appendix 2.

<sup>15</sup> Beaudoin, 43.

<sup>16</sup> Lyrics of popular songs often express this. E.g. George Michael in “Praying for Time” sings “God turned his back and all God’s children crept out the back door... Maybe we should all be praying for time... He (God) can’t come back because he has no children to come back for.” On the album *Listen Without Prejudice*.

previous generation went home from school to an empty house.<sup>17</sup> These are children of neglect. Suffering is also a theme common to this generation.<sup>18</sup> They become slaves to their fears of rejection, and so whilst desiring intimacy, actually create a protective emotional distance around themselves.<sup>19</sup> Their silence that can seem so contemptuous, is in reality an expression of their fear. It would be more helped by a response of compassion than offence.

In an age where many GenXers own more CD-ROMs than books, it is incredible that Japan's Wataru Tsurumi has sold 200,000 copies of his book: *The Complete Manual of Suicide*,<sup>20</sup> mostly to people under the age of 30. Suicide statistics illustrate the plight of GenX, and the hopelessness felt amongst them. Here in NZ, youth suicides (15-24 year olds) have been rising slowly since 1970, with a marked increase from 1985 onwards. This is the first year in which the entire youth category fell into the definition of GenX.<sup>21</sup> The most recent official figures are from 1996,<sup>22</sup> and show that since 1985 the number of youth suicides has doubled.<sup>23</sup> This is a serious problem, and one that gives urgency to the topic of this paper. Surely Christians will want to explore ways of reaching out to this suffering and hurting generation?

A problem though, is that for GenX, their personal spirituality is as hard to talk about as sexual intimacy was for previous generations.<sup>24</sup> A survey by the Presbyterian Church in NZ concluded that *within* the church, "Young people are nervous of older people. They feel awkward. They don't know how to make the first approach."<sup>25</sup> As long as GenX are not required to integrate with older people, life is fine – but since the church is full of older people, it makes it an unattractive place for GenX to be. This does not, however, mean that this generation is disinterested in Christian spirituality.<sup>26</sup>

Generation Xers, while they may seem to be less concerned with the institution of the church, are more concerned with matters of spirituality and spiritual practice than young people of previous decades.<sup>27</sup>

GenX have a "deep suspicion of religious institutions",<sup>28</sup> and often say, "Jesus is great, but what's all that to do with the church?"<sup>29</sup> GenX's often irreverent attitude

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<sup>17</sup> n.a. "X... The Next Generation", 3.

<sup>18</sup> Beaudoin, 177.

<sup>19</sup> Hahn and Verhaagen, 141.

<sup>20</sup> Wesson, 95.

<sup>21</sup> Ministry of Youth Affairs, *15 to 25, A Youth Statistical Profile*, 41

<sup>22</sup> It has been harder to make comparative observations since Sept 95, when the NZ government changed their method for recording ethnicity. This change has obviously not effected the total figures of suicides, however.

<sup>23</sup> Ministry of Health, "Youth Suicide Facts", 2.

<sup>24</sup> Edwards, *Spiritual Friend*, 105.

<sup>25</sup> Stewart, *How to Keep the Young People You Have*, 59.

<sup>26</sup> In 1990 the US Supreme Court upheld a law that allowed prayer clubs to meet on school property outside school hours, without adult supervision. Since then, thousands of Bible and prayer clubs have whooshed into what their members saw as a God-shaped vacuum. Van Biema, "A Surge of Teen Spirit", 26.

<sup>27</sup> Mehlman, "Resources on Spirituality and the Catechumenate", 2.

<sup>28</sup> Beaudoin, 41.

<sup>29</sup> Dunnell, "Spirituality, culture and young people", 15.

towards the church is evident in much of the GenX Christian literature,<sup>30</sup> and in the stance of GenXers who have gone into full time Christian ministry.<sup>31</sup> It is unlikely, therefore, that the traditional Church will meet the needs of this generation, despite the resurgence of some extreme traditionalism in the US.<sup>32</sup> Spiritual directors, however, are free of an institutional label.

GenXers are serious, stressed, self reliant, sceptical, spiritual and survivors.<sup>33</sup> In their often family-less world, they are desperate for acceptance and belonging in a community where reality is normality. If the Church is ultimately to meet this need, a bridge must first be found. Might it be that the ancient art of spiritual direction is one such bridge?

## The Interface

Having an understanding of GenX now allows us to look at the connection between this generation and spiritual direction. In preparing for this paper I conducted a survey to ascertain directors' experience, views and questions regarding GenX.<sup>34</sup> In the Catholic Church it is recognised that, "The majority of today's midlife religious neither speak (GenX's) language nor understand its culture and worldview."<sup>35</sup> Is this true of spiritual directors in NZ too?

Full results of my survey are given in Appendix 2. The data is largely from those who are working with GenX. The majority of directors consider it no harder to direct GenX than others, but also recognise that GenX tend to have a different understanding of what spiritual direction is. Most agree that GenX is not simply the latest young generation, but in fact represents a unique culture. Despite this, only half of my respondents employ a different style of direction.<sup>36</sup> Their opinions were evenly balanced about the adequacy of their training.

### Some insights

It has become obvious to me that there is a communication problem, as distinct from a generation gap.<sup>37</sup> Whilst those interested in GenX believe nothing has been written or suggested about assisting them on their spiritual journeys, the same is true of those

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<sup>30</sup> For example *Soul Purpose* that currently includes an article entitled, "The Incredible and Somewhat Unbelievable Story of the Farting Revival and the Miracle of the Gold Underpants" [see back issues of Challenge Weekly for the story of people's fillings miraculously turning to solid gold], 17.

<sup>31</sup> A typical GenX minister would rather go down in a blaze of deconstruction, fighting for a new style of ministry that deconstructs previous perceptions of the church, than keep a church visibly isolated from the world it is called to serve. Apokis, 3.

<sup>32</sup> Van Biema, "Back to the Yarmulke" and Padgett, "... And to the Latin Mass", 46. These isolated resurgences are proof that GenX refuse to be boxed!

<sup>33</sup> Solomon, *Generation X*, 3.

<sup>34</sup> See Appendix 1 for a copy of the survey itself, and Appendix 2 for a summary of the results.

<sup>35</sup> Sammon, "Last Call for Religious Life", 14.

<sup>36</sup> Although some remarked that their "style" would always vary depending on the individual being directed – i.e. it is different for every directee.

<sup>37</sup> Stewart, 59.

interested in spiritual direction who believe there is no information about directing GenX<sup>38</sup>. The problem is largely one of terminology.<sup>39</sup>

GenX have largely never heard of spiritual directors, and it is unlikely that they would try turning to a “director” to meet their spiritual need. The terminology implies a power imbalance that is unacceptable to GenX. Directors on the other hand appear to be somewhat uninformed about who GenX are and what their needs are: to the point where they assume that direction will be neither wanted nor appreciated.

John Mabry writes:

"They will meet as equals, or not at all. This leads me to believe that, unless they undergo a profound and unexpected shift in their collective psyche, the traditional model of one-on-one spiritual direction will not work with most Generation Xers."<sup>40</sup>

I believe he is correct that, with this attitude, he is unlikely to make spiritual direction “work” with GenX! As an Xer I most certainly value equality, and understand it to be a Biblical principle.<sup>41</sup> A director has a particular function to fulfil, but I do not believe that a status accompanies it.

When Howard Rice spoke at last year’s Spiritual Directors International Conference, he said that very little was known about GenX and that very few Xers are coming for direction.<sup>42</sup> I disagree. Equally uninformed is an Xer, Tom Beaudoin, who implies that spiritual direction is not available:

"Although I am not aware that spiritual direction is set up for Xers at any churches, that would certainly be an idea worth trying. First, however, institutions and ministers would have to reacquaint themselves with the tradition of spiritual direction, spirituality and Christian mysticism."<sup>43</sup>

Similarly, Easum and Bandy talk of the need for “midwives” whilst Hahn and Verhaagen want “narrative disciplers”!<sup>44</sup> These authors consider themselves to be pioneers in the creation of a role that will meet the needs of GenX.<sup>45</sup> They discuss the way in which GenX are desperate for deep and meaningful relationships – including a relationship with someone older and wiser who can disciple and nurture them.

Classically speaking, spiritual directors try to avoid too much teaching or advice giving, however it was the experience of my respondents that for GenX a higher degree of input is not only helpful, but also required.<sup>46</sup> This difference in the style of

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<sup>38</sup> Rohde, “Spiritual Direction with Adolescents”, 171.

<sup>39</sup> Try searching for “GenX” on the World Wide Web and compare the huge number of hits with the few found in searching for “Spiritual direction”: we are talking a different language!

<sup>40</sup> Mabry, 44.

<sup>41</sup> Galatians 3:28 and so on...

<sup>42</sup> Reported by Mabry, 35.

<sup>43</sup> Beaudoin, 173.

<sup>44</sup> Easum and Bandy, *Growing Spiritual Redwoods*, 47 and Hahn and Veraagen, *GenXers After God*, 21.

<sup>45</sup> Hahn and Verhaagen, 181.

<sup>46</sup> See Appendix 2.

directing reflects that, for many years, direction has only been sought by people in their midlife and beyond. Many writers still advise that direction is best started at around this time.<sup>47</sup>

Here we hit upon the key differences in the nature of direction for GenX. They need it; they are crying out for it; they are responding to it. GenXers have fewer years of life to reflect upon, but many directors will be surprised at the quantity of life experience already gained. GenXers have experienced many of the symptoms of midlife transition, at least in part.<sup>48</sup> They have faced life crises, redundancies, relocations, separations, divorces and deaths (often through suicide and autocide<sup>49</sup>). What they need is help in finding God in the midst of those situations.

“Xers relation to suffering lays the groundwork for religiousness. The knowledge of suffering sparks (their) spirituality...”<sup>50</sup> This generation searches for God with a hunger and an appetite, but also with a naivety that is in need of more guidance than a director of an older Christian might normally give. These people are in need of spiritual role models.”<sup>51</sup>

Previously this might have been addressed by discipleship classes for example. However GenXers do not take kindly to the handing down of an impersonal prescription. Their starvation of relationships means that they want above all to form a relationship with someone who can show them what it means to be a Christian, what it means to pray, what it means to develop an intimate relationship with Jesus, and so on. They, “do not want to listen to professional experts; they do want to learn from spiritual travellers!”<sup>52</sup>

The role of a director can be usefully employed long before midlife. This may cause a problem for those who, even subconsciously, have a “minimum age” for directees, believing that it is something for “mature Christians”. Some Xers *are* mature in the faith, but admittedly others may be a long way from God. Can directors cope with the new challenges that will present?

Another potential problem is that often the director must make the first move: “... it is not likely that GenXers will seek out spiritual mentors. Those interested in discipling them need to move toward them in relationship.”<sup>53</sup> This initiatory role is not one commonly attributed to a spiritual director.

Another difference for directors to embrace, is the lack of distinction between sacred and secular for GenXers.<sup>54</sup> In training to become a director, I have been encouraged to help a directee discover and appreciate their “religious experiences” – which is in

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<sup>47</sup> Edwards, 107.

<sup>48</sup> Shelton, *Psychological Issues in Spiritual Direction* – a collection of articles describing some classic traits of midlife.

<sup>49</sup> Autocide refers to a death from a car accident that is thought to have been deliberate, but by definition can seldom be pronounced as suicide by a coroner.

<sup>50</sup> Beaudoin, 97.

<sup>51</sup> Litchfield, “Faith-Mentoring with Young Adults”, 1

<sup>52</sup> n.a., “Spiritual Yearnings”, 2.

<sup>53</sup> Hahn and Verhaagen, 21.

<sup>54</sup> Easum and Brady, 94.

fact a very GenX thing to do! GenX are experts at seeing God's immanence as they debunk the theories of a pedestalled and exclusively transcendent God.

Ironically this must be held in balance with a healthy respect that GenX have for some of the "classical" disciplines, such as meditation, fasting and solitude.<sup>55</sup> The recent resurgence of Gregorian Chant surprised many, though the analysts reckon that most of the CDs purchased have never been heard. Each is "like a magical talisman, continually promising a sacred future time, always within the consumer's grasp."<sup>56</sup> Again, it is an awareness of an inner hunger, but an uncertainty as to how to feed it.

"Spiritual directors can be powerful allies in helping this troubled generation reach their full potential by companioning them with understanding, mentoring them with equanimity, and supporting their efforts to find meaningful community on their own terms."<sup>57</sup>

For a non Xer to direct an Xer, there must be an awareness of the cross-cultural dimension of this ministry.<sup>58</sup> "Xers are skilled at being casually suggestive and at simultaneously creating and destroying."<sup>59</sup> For a director to work with this type of attitude and response there needs to be a deep intuition operating. A director who is misled by an aloof presentation can lose the most significant religious experience. Those who express exasperation and wonder why directees insist on playing games, are probably not gifted at ministering to GenX! The development of trust is a slow process for an Xer, that can be both frustrating, but also immensely rewarding once the connections have been established.

In using styles of direction developed by older people, the director must be able to distinguish and extract the pre-Xer's agenda.<sup>60</sup> One safe area that forms a common thread through all direction, regardless of the generation being ministered to, is an emphasis on story. Storytelling is a particularly effective form of communication for GenX. The goal of direction is "to help (the directee) see her story intersect with God's story and then link up with the stories of others in community."<sup>61</sup>

Other "director characteristics" appreciated by Xers are pragmatism, caution and an attitude of consultation rather than imposition.<sup>62</sup> There must, above all, be a reality of relationship. If there is no genuine appreciation for this generation, never pretend there is!

Further practical suggestions are made in Appendix 3, whilst Appendix 4 explores some alternative forms of spiritual direction: the use of email and group direction.

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<sup>55</sup> Hahn and Verhaagen, 101ff.

<sup>56</sup> Beaudoin, 38.

<sup>57</sup> Mabry, 47.

<sup>58</sup> Roberts, "Spiritual Places: Christ and the Carpark", 10.

<sup>59</sup> Beaudoin, 119.

<sup>60</sup> Hamill and Stewart, "Young People and Spiritual Awareness", 116.

<sup>61</sup> Hahn and Verhaagen, 177.

<sup>62</sup> Codrington, 5.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to examine the place and nature of spiritual direction for GenX. We have discovered that GenXers are in fact crying out for the sort of relationship offered through spiritual direction: there is very much a place for it. Those of us who are directors would do well to work on our availability, though, since many of the Xers who want and need our services do not know that we exist.

The nature of direction for GenX must take into account their unique culture. For those familiar with this culture, that identification will be happening spontaneously – to the point where the director is hardly aware of the changes he or she has made in approach. For others the changes are more noticeable and conscious.

This paper concludes that just as there is a place for directing GenX, so its nature must reflect their culture. These differences from “normal” direction form the core content of this paper. If these differences are understood and addressed in the way direction is offered to GenX, I believe that the ancient art of spiritual direction can indeed be a bridge that links the existing Christian Church to this lonely generation.

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## APPENDIX 3

# Practical Suggestions

What about a list of Golden Rules for improving the spiritual direction to GenX?

It ought to go without saying that no generation can be programmed into a 12 step process with guaranteed success - but let's give it a go!

Successful directors of Xers will probably:

1. Model the Christian faith – and be consistent about it.
2. Initiate a direction relationship if they think it might be what the Xer needs.
3. Believe that reality is essential: they will admit mistakes, weaknesses and ignorance.
4. Know that authenticity is key: be themselves; be vulnerable; discuss the uncomfortable.
5. Communicate acceptance – but remembering reality; they will genuinely accept Xers for who they are before paying lip service to this.
6. Accept that ambiguity is a part of GenX culture; and be able to meet them in that place... Flexibility, creativity and originality are part of this.
7. Understand that the compassion of Christ is crucial – there will be an ability to feel *with* them their struggles & pains, without condescension.
8. See them as equals: your function differs, but your status doesn't.
9. Be free from any sense of there being a rule book for this ministry.
10. Be unshockable and non judgmental
11. Offer guidance and information
12. Listen very well.

## APPENDIX 4

# Other Forms of Spiritual Direction

### By email?

What of email as a medium for conducting spiritual direction?

I believe there is huge potential in meeting GenXers in their environment by conducting direction in this way. For GenX especially it is easier to share deep and personal truths from the security of a keyboard. The abundance of chat rooms – plus the horror stories about extra marital affairs that are formed through this medium – are ample evidence of the workability of email for effective communication. This is an area that is deserving of trial and exploration. Obvious factors to be considered would include:

- security and confidentiality (who else might read the emails, what happens to them after they have been read, whose property are they, etc.)
- boundaries (interjection is impossible, so either party could “hog” the conversation, or spend for ever avoiding questions... Also the scope of direction would need to be clearly understood by both parties)
- frequency of correspondence (whilst there is no need to reply to every email that one receives, it is unlikely that a director would be wanting to receive a message every day)

### Group Direction?

Some have wondered whether group direction, or wisdom circles<sup>63</sup> might be applicable to GenX.<sup>64</sup> The equality and collaboration would be appreciated, however it would miss their cry for a significant relationship of depth, and the opportunity to see a model of “living the faith” through a director’s transparent reality.<sup>65</sup> A group approach might well address the immediate goal of assisting people in their journeys with God, however the particular GenX need for developing a relationship of reality and trust would be left begging.

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<sup>63</sup> Mabry, 45.

<sup>64</sup> This was raised in several surveys. See Edwards, 175ff for an explanation of what group direction entails and its strengths and weaknesses.

<sup>65</sup> Hahn and Verhaagen, 147, 172, 184.