

**SPIRITUAL DIRECTION FOR THOSE IN
ORDAINED MINISTRIES
SPECIFIC ISSUES AND NEEDS THAT
ARISE**

by

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Spiritual Directors' Training Programme of Spiritual Growth Ministries.**

SPIRITUAL DIRECTION FOR THOSE IN ORDAINED MINISTRIES

SPECIFIC ISSUES AND NEEDS THAT ARISE

An Opening Comment

One of my key motivations in undertaking the Spiritual Directors' Training Programme has been to gain accreditation to be especially available for the direction of ordained ministers. As an ordained minister for many years, and a diocesan bishop for the last ten, for most of that time living in provincial and rural centres, I have been acutely aware of the lack of accessible trained spiritual directors.

This research project aimed further to explore the value of, and the need for, the spiritual direction of those involved in full-time church ministry, highlighting some of the specific difficulties and frustrations, for both directors and directees, in the process.

In order to target a large enough sample I sent questionnaires to all the accredited directors in the Association of Christian Spiritual Directors in Aotearoa-New Zealand, asking them, where they had experience of directing ordained ministers, both to return the appropriate director's form and to invite their ordained directee/s to fill in and return the other form. (I asked one clergy with a director outside that category to return a form.) As a result there was a clear focus on those accredited and trained by the one association, but it also meant I reached a wide sample of directors and directees.

Both spiritual directors who direct ministers and ordained ministers who are under spiritual direction were generous in their response to the questionnaire.

The result was a wide range of views and experiences, and so readers may find the most interesting part of the research is actually the data which is set out as an appendix to this summary.

HOW MINISTERS VALUE SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

Focusing On God

It was clear in all the responses that spiritual direction is valued as providing “a safe forum to explore who/what God is for me”; a space to “value my relationship with God and keep it in good repair”; an “opportunity to deepen, explore, enjoy and evaluate one’s relationship with God”; to “explore significant “God” experiences”; to “encourage a deeper experience of the Holy Spirit”. As one minister said “direction has enabled me to stay true to God’s call, despite the difficulties I have faced” : another “helps me integrate spirituality with life and ministry”.

As direction encourages “reflection on my personal journey”, ministers speak of the high value of being given permission to “attend to my own needs”, “to love myself”, “to be focused on my feelings”.

One director referred to direction being “an anchor point” during a time of profound mystical experience and working through how to use that experience.

In all this, many directors and directees made the point that these things are not necessarily specific to ordained ministers.

Offering Trust

A range of ministers see that their director is “someone who is there for them” – “the trust of sharing things as no one else does”, “keeping me honest and accountable”, “the objectivity and distance of the director from my work with no other interest than to attend to God on my behalf”. Direction provides “a trusted listener”: “a chance to put it all “out there” – I tend to bottle things up” : “helps me “off load” in a safe place without negatively damaging others”.

Keeping The Journey Personal

In all this, direction helps ministers in their need to maintain “freshness”, be “authentic”, “real”, “not just acting out of routine”, having “integrity on the long term”, “perseverance and stamina for the long journey”.

Direction specifically helps the ministers in their “familiarity with holy things”: “having to “perform” prayers at all times” : “the trap of running empty” and “substituting one’s own personal time with the Lord” with the tools of the job – or “maintaining a persona in public which may not reflect one’s own personal feelings”.

The Public And The Personal

A reiterated issue is the “fishbowl living” of the minister who “lives with the strong expectations of others, and of the job.” Because their own spiritual life is so much in the public eye, it is often “harder to own our weaknesses”, and “easier to feel guilt at not having all the answers”, “the inevitable disparity between what we are called to be, and sometimes depressing failures and the inadequacies of our lives”.

For others, “the Church becomes the focus rather than God”. “Prayer and Bible reading is so often work focused, and fails to be personally refreshing”. “Theological knowledge gets in the way of experience”.

Some need help for the “professional fences to be pulled down” – “unless I am a person, I cannot be a priest”. Others wrestle with “priesthood” as “part of the priest’s being”.

The Demands Of The Institution

Allied to this is “the power structure surrounding ordination” as it affects prayer and relationships with both the non-ordained laity and with superiors in the hierarchy. “Because the minister is ever giving out to others, to deepen and grow themselves is vital”. While at the same time “spiritually caring for others makes it difficult to be open about one’s own barren desert times, faith struggles”.

Permission To Push Boundaries

Another specific issue is the fact that spiritual direction can offer “the encouragement to explore changing perceptions of God/the Holy”. “To maintain a healthy tension between historic continuity and openness to change and development”. While “some ministers lack adequate vocabulary/experience in discussing their spiritual life”, others are “too set in their belief or unwilling to have some areas of their life touched.” Others seek objective help to “probe out belief systems”, especially “when this might seem at variance with institutional demands”.

Busyness

There were several references to the pressures of work on a minister. “Because ministry consumes so much of one’s life (ironically) God may be marginalised, personal prayer becomes secondary and one tends others better than one cares for one’s own soul”. “Busyness and finding it hard to make time for prayer and keeping a basic link with God”. “The issue of lack of time is heightened by the expectation that the ordained are holy people with plenty of time to pray and meditate, which is simply not true”.

Some other specific issues that impact on the minister’s ability to journey spiritually are:

- a) dealing with grief and working through it effectively at a personal level;
- b) frustration and anger and resulting in personal attrition;
- c) those in authority and in the administration of the church showing insensitivity;
- d) making sense of being in ministry and staying with it;
- e) learning to respect the different spiritualities of the congregation, i.e. different from their own;
- f) the struggle to be one’s self with the gifts one has been given in a work setting that expects different things;

- g) because ministry in the church is challenging enough, the minister in direction may have no desire to be further challenged, or the director may be tempted not to add to the stress.

We must note however that for quite a number of those who responded, there were not seen to be any major issues specific to the ordained. In fact, the director and the directee work hard at treating the direction of a minister as for any other direction. “The seeker of God is the seeker of God”.

Other directors found it difficult to generalise. “It varies considerably with all directees”: “they are as different as butchers from bakers”.

THE CHOICE OF A DIRECTOR – LAY? ORDAINED? DENOMINATION?

There is a clear difference of opinion in the choice of a director as to whether it is an advantage for an ordained minister to choose another ordained minister of their own denomination, or to choose an ordained or lay person from another denomination. In fact, about one quarter, 16 of the 62 directees, chose an ordained minister in their own denomination. Others either deliberately chose or certainly found it an advantage to have either a minister from another denomination or a lay person, usually from another denomination.

The advantage of choosing an ordained director from one’s own denomination is that they “spoke the same language”, had a good understanding of denominational structures, and the tradition from which the minister comes, which “helped communication”.

Negatively however, is the disadvantage of “possibly getting stuck with tales of mutual situations/gossip”, and the disadvantage of “knowing that we will meet up in other situations so that issues of detachment and confidentiality could be difficult”.

The majority who chose someone from a different denomination, or a lay person, usually made a deliberate choice to find someone who would “extend their world views”, bring “a wider perspective”, bring a “richness” of another tradition to the direction. It would

also have the advantage that this “offers confidentiality and impartiality” : having “no relationship other than direction”, with “no church committees etc. in common, so that we meet solely for spiritual direction” : and indeed the freedom to “lament without worrying about the others’ involvement”. As someone said “my previous director of the same denomination was sometimes too chatty/gossipy, and that was largely why I changed”.

Lay Direction

For those seeking a lay director, whether of the same denomination or a different denomination, the main consideration seemed to be their skills as a spiritual director. “Someone with the training and experience”, “suitable to my needs”, “a person of prayer”, “they listen and work with me which is the key”. “Over 30 years, clergy were not always helpful to me as they were untrained. The present lay woman is refreshing, excellent at asking the “ouch” type questions .. challenging”.

Lay Directors found that where the contractual agreement was clearly established, they had the advantage of being “more objective: as an outsider I offer confidentiality and impartiality”. A few of the lay directors felt that earlier in their ministry they might have been “intimidated” by having an ordained directee – “some anxieties about coping theologically”. They faced the fact that “many ordained think they are spiritual directors themselves by definition, and find it hard to accept the idea of direction from one who is (a) lay, (b) a woman.” But in practice, these fears were soon allayed. On the other hand, several ministers preferred an ordained minister because they felt “they would understand and appreciate the issues I face”. “I am more confident with an ordained person”.

In the matter of choosing a director, a small number, presumably from smaller provincial centres, pointed out that the choice of a suitable director is limited to the few that are available to them, and the ease of travel to get to spiritual direction.

THOSE CLERICAL HATS

Both directors and directees were asked - how easy is it for the ordained to drop their “clerical hats”? It may be a tribute to the quality of the spiritual directors that two thirds of the ordained ministers felt it was easy to “drop their hats”. “We focus on my spiritual life as a person who just happens to be ordained”. Most directors and directees felt that they are clear in their own minds, that the focus is on “spiritual growth”, “prayer issues”, “the real me”. “Companionship”, “friendship”, “a non-judgmental director”, seem to be the key. “In the discovery of who I am, hats have to come off, but nakedness is a cautious delicate process”.

However, a significant number of replies suggest that it is not quite so easy for the ordained to drop their “clerical hats”. “What I am as a minister informs so much of my life and spirituality”, “ministry impacts hugely on who I am”. One lay director comments “it is such an all-consuming ministry, quite different from other employment”. “It takes time to look beyond the professional God relationship into the person”.

Directors themselves were more evenly divided with half the ordained directors finding the clerical role and context impinging on the personal. A similar proportion of lay directors felt that the “clerical hat” makes the role more difficult to drop. But again, several stated that it is variable with individuals.

Some interesting comments: “It varies with gender and denomination” ... “Women find it easier ; hierarchical denominations (Anglicans and Catholics) find it harder”. “Anglicans leave their collars behind once we get “real” ... especially in the sexual area. Others don’t wear them, so less easy to see”.

A few of the ordained made points like “I have a very “high” view of ordination ... I may drop my “clerical hat”, but not my clerical vest” Or again “I drop my job/role easily enough, but not being clerical”.

DIRECTION AS A JOB REQUIREMENT

The responses show that while many ordained ministers' job descriptions recommended spiritual direction, the great majority sought direction out of choice. Where they were required by the job, many said it was "their choice anyway", and quite a number already were under spiritual direction before ordination. The responses show that for both directors and directees, the freedom of choice to attend spiritual direction is very important.

On the other hand, a significant number admitted they only began spiritual direction because it was a requirement – "it got me there!". Others said "having it as a job requirement makes it "more purposeful" : "makes it easier to justify time and cost"; is an "encouragement and reminder of its significance" and "maintains continuity". There were a few cases reported of "game playing" and resistance by clergy required to attend, "low commitment ... half heartedness". But most reported that while the requirement for direction may have been their primary motivation, "where search for God is the key, in time direction deepens vocation".

Even where initial experiences of spiritual direction may have been tentative, "as the "yes" moments became more frequent, our mutual enthusiasm, sense of fun, and delight in the God of "surprising wisdom and grace" grew".

Experience of a substantial number of directees was, with time, an increasing readiness in ministers "to probe the depths of their God relationship" through spiritual direction. "Initially some anxiety but also expectancy ... which develops into simply enjoying time to reflect on their relationship with God." "It really does work, is safe, and very fruitful".

FRUSTRATIONS FOR DIRECTORS

A significant number (11) had no comment to make, and one director said “I enjoy directing clergy, as they are normally focused and intentional in their journey”.

In contrast “consistently year by year, my most difficult and least rewarding directees are the ordained. Their work with and for others seems to make it difficult for them to listen to God for themselves, and in attending to their own journeys.” Several referred to the danger of “getting hooked into parish problems”, especially “when the people and places” are familiar to the director.

Specific frustrations were:

- “too much attention on ministry training to the cerebral, and not enough to personal/spiritual growth”
- “the ordained can limit their experience by the parameters of their task, and not be free to explore broader aspects of spiritual formation”
- “clergy pre-occupation with or overvaluing their role”
- ministers “refusing to cherish and enjoy the delicate and precious and personal journey”
- ability to theologise ... may not help “the individual to remain vulnerable and childlike, open to surprises”.

SPECIFIC NEEDS FOR DIRECTORS OF THE ORDAINED

Lay directors felt that having a background in theology, bible and church history, and “having some understanding of the aspects of the minister’s pastoral responsibilities and the stress and demands on them”, can be useful. Three directors said “being married to one helps”.

Amongst a large number of responses, there is the strong conviction that “the skills of spiritual direction, and taking prayer and experience of God seriously, would greatly benefit anyone involved in parish/pastoral ordained ministry. “We are likely only to help others, if we are open to guidance ourselves”.

MONTHLY SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

The statistics quite clearly showed that the huge majority valued spiritual direction as a monthly exercise. 53 of the 63 ministers who replied as directees, attended monthly, and some of the others were less frequent simply because of distance and travel being an issue for them.

THE FOCUS OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

One of the clearest parts of the questionnaire for both directors and directees, was defining the difference between spiritual direction, supervision and counselling. Again it is probably a tribute to the training of spiritual directors that people in both categories are quite clear that the focus of spiritual direction is the “directee’s relationship with God”. “their prayer life”: “where God is/isn’t in their life generally”: “one’s own stuff personal to one’s faith walk”: “helping the ministers retain a core of personal/spiritual identity apart from their ministry”. Again they describe the director/directee relationship as being “equal”, “a companioning process”.

Equally clearly, those who responded could define supervision as concerning “one’s work relationships in ministry”.

Counselling was described as “focusing on a problem/issue/difficulty in the counsellee’s life”.

Nevertheless while clear concerning the focus of each of these categories, many directors and directees spoke of the overlap of the different factors. Some directors practise in all three areas. “Sometimes one slips into supervision”; “some remedial counsel is often necessary”; “within spiritual direction, I have appreciated supporting facing difficult ministry situations”; “it is difficult to define the boundary with a Christian, whose God is interested in all of life”.

However, directors and directees are agreed that “where there is a cross over into other categories, it is important to declare that”. “We allow separate time for work issues”: “I keep returning to how can I assist this relationship with God”.

THE VITAL PLACE OF DIRECTION IN THE LIFE OF THE MINISTER

Amongst those questioned, there is undoubtedly keen enthusiasm for the place of spiritual direction. 44 of the 63 ministers freely commented “I look forward to it”, “I would never be without it”; “A very positive discipline”; “Essential to my relationship, healing and challenging”; “I would never have survived in ministry without it”.

Directors equally agree spiritual direction is vital/essential/to be encouraged/crucial among ministers, to keep their spiritual personal journey alive and developing, “especially for leaders in it”.

Negatively “burnout, dissolution, loss of vision, and cynicism all share a common factor ... lack of a sustaining form of spiritual nurture”.

“Priesthood must be centred in prayer”, “the skills of spiritual direction in taking prayer and experience of God seriously would greatly benefit any ministry, any parish pastoral ministry”.

SOME CONCLUDING PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON THE RESEARCH.

I realise I have enjoyed this piece of work because the enthusiastic range of responses to the Questionnaires reflected the high level of interest it holds for both ordained ministers and their spiritual directors.

Clearly those ordained ministers who seek spiritual direction give it a high priority both for their personal well-being and journeying, and for effectively sustaining their ministering to the spiritual needs of those they serve. I was impressed at their almost universal commitment to regular and monthly direction.

What the research fails to show of course are the views of the larger number of those who still choose to live out their ordained ministries without the support of spiritual direction.

But for me the research provides strong evidence to encourage denominational leaders to continue to commend spiritual direction to all their clergy, and to set in place the time and financial provisions that enable it to be accessible. The responses eloquently document both the need for, and the benefits of it. Denominations can also be confident that, with accredited directors, once even reluctant ministers enter into direction they are highly likely to enjoy, and even rely on, its benefits.

The research also affirms the efforts of those who over recent years have worked to make available an ecumenical network of lay and ordained spiritual directors. Most ordained ministers respond positively to a wide choice of directors, to both the stimulus and to the confidentiality this offers them.

Appendices

1. Questionnaire for a Spiritual Director
2. Questionnaire for the Ordained Minister's Spiritual Director

FOR A SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR TO FILL IN:

Spiritual Direction for those in Ordained Ministry.

[THE CONTENTS OF THESE FORMS WILL BE CONFIDENTIAL IN TERMS OF THE PRIVACY ACT, AND THE INFORMATION WILL ONLY BE USED TO ANSWER THE GENERAL QUESTIONS FOR WHICH THE RESEARCH IS BEING COLLECTED.]

Are there specific issues/needs that arise in relation to the Spiritual Direction of those in ordained ministry?

a) These comments are based on my involvement with : 1 / 2 / 3 / more
ordained directee/s within the last 5 years

b) Are you ordained or lay?.....
Does this affect Spiritual Direction in any way?

.....
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.....

c) How often does the directee attend sessions?

d) What is the key value in your spiritual direction of the ordained directee?

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.....
.....

e) Did the directee seek Spiritual Direction because it is part of a Job Description, or of choice? YES / NO / BOTH

Does this influence Spiritual Direction in any way?

.....
.....

f) How do you both view spiritual direction in contrast to supervision or counselling?

.....
.....

g) With what enthusiasm/interest etc. does the ordained minister respond to direction?

a) early in direction

b) late in direction

.....

How easy is it for the ordained in Spiritual Direction to drop their "clerical hats"?

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h) Do you see any issues that are specific to spiritual direction of the ordained?

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i) Do you face any frustration specific to the spiritual direction of the ordained?

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j) How are you supported in your own ministry as a director of the ordained?

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k) Have you any specific training needs in relation to spiritual direction of the ordained?

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Any other comments you have on the place of spiritual direction in the life and ministry of the ordained.

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SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR :

GENDER: MALE / FEMALE AGE: Under 30 / 30-45 / 45-60 / over 60

SPIRITUAL DIRECTEE:

GENDER: MALE / FEMALE AGE: Under 30 / 30-45 / 45-60 / over 60

[Please return to Murray Mills, Box 227, Napier by 31 July 2000]

FOR THE ORDAINED MINISTER SPIRITUAL DIRECTEE

[THE CONTENTS OF THESE FORMS WILL BE CONFIDENTIAL IN TERMS OF THE PRIVACY ACT, AND THE INFORMATION WILL ONLY BE USED TO ANSWER THE GENERAL QUESTIONS FOR WHICH THE RESEARCH IS BEING COLLECTED.]

Thank you for being willing to take part in this Questionnaire. It is part of a research thesis I am undertaking towards my training as a Spiritual Director. I would be grateful if it could be returned to:

[Murray Mills, Box 227, Napier by 31 July 2000]

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- a) Is your Director lay or ordained?
 - What factors led to this choice
 -
 - b) Is your Director of the same denomination?
 - Has this any significance for you?
 -
 -
 - c) How easy is it for you, or them, to drop "clerical hats" in spiritual direction?
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.....
 - d) How often do you attend sessions?
 - Are you required to do this by your job description? YES / NO
 - How does this affect spiritual direction?
.....
.....
 - e) What is the key value for you in spiritual direction? In what ways has it
enhanced spiritual growth and/or practice of ministry?
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(f) How would you define spiritual direction as opposed to supervision, counselling?

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(e) Are there any issues in spiritual direction that you think may be specific to those who are ordained?

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(f) Are there any frustrations for you in Spiritual Direction?

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Any comments on the place of spiritual direction in your life and ministry.

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SPIRITUAL DIRECTOR :

GENDER: MALE / FEMALE AGE: Under 30 / 30-45 / 45-60 / over 60

SPIRITUAL DIRECTEE:

GENDER: MALE / FEMALE AGE: Under 30 / 30-45 / 45-60 / over 60

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