

**THE MINISTRY OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTION -
AN INTERFACE BETWEEN THE CHURCH AND
SOCIETY**

by

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At the start of his book, *SOUL FRIEND*, Kenneth Leech highlighted the state of spirituality in the 1960s. There was disenchantment with institutional Christianity. It was perceived, by many, that humanity was headed in a non-religious direction. Society was deemed to be secularized. However, contrary to that perception, there was in fact a search for inner/spiritual meaning. This was evidenced by the rise in drug use, meditation schools, Yoga, and 'paperback mysticism'. Kenneth Leech noted that the Church, at the time, seemed ill-prepared to meet the renewed interest in spiritual issues.¹

When I read this observation of Leech's I was intrigued. Here was a situation in which society yearned for spiritual meaning and yet the Church appeared to be unable to make an adequate response. As I have pondered this situation my reflection has led me to consider the state of spiritual awareness in our early twenty-first century society. In this paper I note evidence of spiritual awareness in society around us, I highlight current attitudes toward the Church, and overview some of the characteristics of current society. In light of these findings, I reflect on a perceived chasm that exists between the Church and society. I then suggest how the ministry of spiritual direction might function as an interface between the Church and society that would bridge this perceived chasm.

First impressions of New Zealand society may lead one to think it is secular and therefore, indifferent toward spiritual matters. I work in an environment where the pursuit of lifestyle is a high priority: owning a boat and going fishing are keen pursuits. "Enjoy life to the full because you are a long time dead", has been said on more than one occasion. If someone dies doing what he / she enjoyed, then that is a notable achievement. It somehow provides some compensation for death to have come prematurely. More than one colleague has said that he does not believe in God: "That religious stuff is not for me: it's for women and kids".

There appears to be a sense of self-sufficiency accompanying our relatively affluent lifestyle. Prior to his conversion, author Lee Strobels' attitude was that he had a successful career, a house in the suburbs, a wife, two kids, a nice car: "Who needs God?"² It appears that money is able to buy a fair amount of comfort, and consequently, people appear to be 'anaesthetized' from the brunt of some of life's significant issues. (This sense of self-sufficiency and comfort stands out when one returns to New Zealand after spending time in a developing country.) On the surface, then, there may appear to be little interest in spiritual concerns.

Evidently this is not the case. The Weekend Herald Review from New Years' Eve 2005 contained an article entitled *SOUL SEARCHING*. In this article, journalist, Claire Harvey, noted the rise of interest in spiritual matters in New Zealand society. There may be a decline in church attendance, yet people are still intrigued by matters of the soul. Attention to personal spirituality has replaced the practices associated with religious observance.

This interest in spirituality is evidenced by the inclusion of meditation classes at gyms, the expansion of the Mind - Body - Spirit section in book stores, an increased interest in: nature worship, New Age, witchcraft, Eastern religions and Maori spirituality.³ People may say they are not religious, yet they acknowledge that they believe in a 'Higher Power'. A work colleague told me that he doesn't believe in God, but he does believe in an afterlife: "There has to be".

¹ K. Leech, *Soul Friend*; Pennsylvania: Morehouse Publishing, 2001, pg 3.

² L. Strobels, *Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary*; Michigan: Zondervan, 1993, pg 27.

³ C. Harvey, *Soul Searching - Weekend Herald Review*, Auckland: NZ Herald, 2005, pg B3.

Evidently for many people there has been the experience of a presence, power or God which has occurred uninvited. These experiences are referred to as 'peak experiences' or 'affairs of the soul'.⁴ They are profound moments in which a person has experienced sensations such as: love, understanding, happiness or rapture. He / she has felt more alive, more *complete as a person and yet unified* with the world. There has been a greater awareness of: truth, beauty, simplicity, harmony and goodness. These soul affairs have been intensely personal and intimate experiences in which something inexpressible has been triggered deep within the individual.

People who have experienced these affairs of the soul tend to remain silent about them. They don't want to be thought of as mentally unstable or too 'religious'. In response to reports that musician, Dave Dobbyn, had met God in his living room, a work colleague scoffed and said words to the effect that Dave had gone 'loopy'. There may also be a tendency to deny, forget, or set aside the experience due to a fear of not being in control. This is due to the random and uninvited nature of the experience.

Paul Hawker's impression, based on his research into soul affairs, is that far from being dead, God, or the 'Higher Power', is alive and well and living in people's hearts: just seldom on their lips. It seems people are "biologically hard-wired for transcendent spiritual or religious moments".⁵

Lee Strobel's has made a couple of interesting observations.⁶ There is a hunger for a personal experience of God and a desire for an anchor amidst morally adrift times. Many baby-boomers are not turned off by religion.⁷ They are just indifferent to churches.

Many people who have experienced soul affairs thought the church would be a place to find an interface between humans and God. However, in the experience of these people many churches lacked soul. There was no perceived experience of God and the churches appeared to be places of spiritual boredom.

Research done by A.C. Nielsen, c. 2001 - 2002, on behalf of the Presbyterian Church confirmed that spirituality is still strong within our society. There is a belief that there is more to life than just existing. However, spirituality is perceived as a personal, inward and reflective process, not dependant upon church attendance. It is perceived that there is no need for an external party to guide a person in how belief is defined and practiced.

The research revealed a number of negative stereotypes that respondents had of the Church. The Church was seen as irrelevant to their current lifestyle; it did not fit with their aspirations. Church services were boring.

A work colleague asked me how my weekend was.
I replied: "OK".
"Church that exciting, was it?" was his retort.

⁴ P. Hawker, *Secret Affairs of the Soul*, Canada: Northstone Publishing, 2000, pg 52.

⁵ Hawker, *Secret Affairs*, pg 119.

⁶ Strobel, *Inside the Mind*, pp 45 - 49.

⁷ I understand Strobel's use of the word 'religion', in this context, to be synonymous with 'spirituality' / 'spiritual matters'.

As an institution the Church was perceived as dictatorial, judgemental and narrow minded. Church attendees are told what to believe and how they must live. There is little freedom for independent thought and exploration. Coupled with this is an intolerance of other lifestyles, cultures and religions. This is an overall impression people in society have of the Church.

Not all the feedback to A.C. Nielsen was negative. Some of the respondents highlighted the role the Church can play in being a vehicle through which people can help others in the community. Help could consist of practical assistance or counselling services. Some respondents experienced Church congregations to be warm and supportive; offering a sense of belonging. It is interesting to note the lack of apparent anticipation that the Church should or could be a place where one might experience God. Despite, some positive outlooks toward the Church, the overall tone of the research left me with the sense that there is a polarization between the Church and our society.

The New Zealand Herald article, SOUL SEARCHING, did point out that in response to a hunger for emotional engagement, the Evangelical, Charismatic 'faiths' were increasing in numbers. Alan Jamieson's research into church leavers notes another side to this situation. World-wide the Evangelical, Charismatic, Pentecostal stream of churches is growing rapidly, but in Western cultures these same churches have wide open back doors. The number of "disgruntled, disillusioned, disaffiliated people" leaving these churches is increasing.⁸ Jamieson attributes the cause of this phenomenon to a combination of: the individual's faith journey, church theology and practice, and the influence of the wider societal context.

The stereotypical church leaver has actually been quite involved in the life of his / her Church. Often this has been in a leadership capacity such as: elder, preacher, or home group leader. While heavily involved in ministry something was changing within them: their own faith journey was being challenged. Doubts and questions arose as they evaluated aspects of their faith which they had taken for granted up until that time. For many church leavers these times of questioning were triggered by significant events which caused them to view life differently. Some of these events were: burn-out, sickness, redundancy, career moves, and organizational changes within their church. *Their experience within these situations brought on doubt and* led to a disillusionment with the Church structure or even a disenchantment with the whole Church package. Many felt they were drying up spiritually.

The Church culture also contributed to the church leaver's exit. Jamieson pointed out that Evangelical churches have a "reaping-cantered Christianity" but do not know what to do with people as they mature in the Christian faith. Priority is given to evangelism and conversion. After the conversion experience discipleship may be strong, but there is not an ongoing focus on maturing in terms of faith transition and change.

James Fowler has identified six stages of faith.⁹ Fowler understands faith to be a process that is dynamic, changing and evolving. Faith is a way of living as opposed to a set of belief statements that one either accepts or rejects. Each stage of faith represents the manner in which an individual processes and lives out his or her creed. No stage is better than the others, people just tend to settle at different stages. To move from one stage to the next requires a significant degree of upheaval.

⁸ A. Jamieson; *A Churchless Faith*; London: SPCK, 2002, pg 11.

⁹ Jamieson, *Churchless Faith*, pg 109.

Of particular interest to this paper are the third and fourth stages of faith. The labels used for these stages are the ones employed by Jamieson.¹⁰ A short summary of these two stages follows.

Stage three is the stage of the 'Loyalist'. The individual is a conformist; acutely sensitive to the expectations and judgments of significant people in the faith community. Beliefs and values are held to with strong conviction but have not been examined critically by the individual. There is adherence to an external authority such as the Bible or the Pastor. Enormous meaning for personal faith and identity is found in the pursuit of the various ministries and activities of the church. Dualistic understandings are prevalent such as: good/bad, Christian/non-Christian, sacred/secular, and saved/unsaved.

Stage four is the stage of the 'Critic'. The individual has a new sense of self which takes responsibility for his / her own actions beliefs and values. It is a stage of examining faith and practice, which results in new respect and trust for one's inner feelings, intuitions and personal judgments. It is a strongly individualistic stage.

According to Jamieson, many churches cater for the third stage loyalist. When anyone starts to break out of the mould and move beyond the loyalist stage, the culture of the church is not equipped to cope and the individual feels the need to leave the institution because he or she no longer fits in. The Church culture struggles with the questions being asked and the individual is no longer able to handle the sense of restriction and confinement he or she experiences. In effect, the church leaver is in the position of transition from the stage three loyalist to the stage four critic.

Another contributing factor to the phenomenon of church leavers is the current climate of post-modernism within broader society. Don Carson critiques the post-modern worldview in his book: *BECOMING CONVERSANT WITH THE EMERGING CHURCH*.¹¹ He notes that in the last few decades there has been a substantial shift in Western culture's approach to truth and the perceived ability to know truth.¹² It is this approach to how we know things that highlights the influence that post-modernism has on our society.

Current society denounces the idea that there is absolute truth. Objective knowledge cannot be attained. There are many methods that individuals use to discern truth, and the truth they discover is only applicable to the person or group of persons within that cultural or societal setting. The principle determining factor of truth is the individual not an authoritative source. Truth then becomes a matter of subjective perspective. To espouse truth that is foundational to all people is deemed to "trample on the splendid diversity of the creeds, cultures and races that constitute humankind".¹³

This understanding of truth affects society's attitude toward religion and spirituality. Instead of there being a sense of true and false religion, all religions are considered to contain truth. All religions lead to God; they go about it in different ways. Therefore the person on the street can pick and choose elements from the smorgasbord of religious practice available to suit him or herself. It is an example of syncretism.

¹⁰ Jamieson, *Churchless Faith*, pp 114 -119.

¹¹ Chapter four of his book is entitled: Personal Reflections on Postmodernism's Contribution and Challenges.

¹² D. Carson; *Becoming Conversant With The Emerging Church*; Michigan: Zondervan, 2005, pg 75.

¹³ Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, pg 97.

Another effect of a relative approach to truth is the ongoing secularization of society. If truth is determined by the individual, then religious claims of truth do not hold an authoritative place. Religion gets squeezed to the periphery of life. The importance of addressing issues such as the existence of God, and the implications that poses, are deemed to be in the realm of personal preference. Therefore they are not normative for society in general. This stands in contrast to the predominant Church view and teaching that there is a source of absolute truth that is applicable to all societies.

The current climate of postmodernism in society at large appears then to pose a challenge to the predominant third stage Church faith community. On the one hand there is the apparent dogmatic stance of the Christian Church with its reference to absolute authority and truth. (As noted earlier there are the accompanying perceived notions of a judgmental stance, narrow-mindedness and intolerance to differing points of view.) On the other hand, society has a relativistic outlook on life which gives the impression that inclusiveness is all important and 'anything can go' and be considered legitimate.

There appears to be a state of polarization between the Church and society in general. Earlier I referred to a perceived chasm between the church and society. The worldview of the Church is at odds with the current worldview of society. This has raised concerns for me.

If the Church's creed is expressed in a dogmatic, exclusive manner, what hope has it of attracting individuals from outside that perspective, who come from the mindset of a personal, relativistic interpretation? If the Church and society are diametrically opposed in their understanding of how truth is defined and discerned, then how is the church going to attract people to its Gospel message, let alone survive in the long term?

To put it another way: where does the person who has had a profound 'affair of the soul' find an environment in which to reflect upon and nurture that spiritual experience? If the experience is not in line with the Church's expected norm and teaching, then chances are there will not be a welcome mat at the front door. As it is, there appears to be a back door open for those who currently ask the 'wrong' sorts of questions in the Church.

Society's perception of the Church is a perception and may not necessarily reflect individual Church culture. However, it is the perception that members of the Church confront each day. How then do these members go about bridging the apparent chasm between the two worldviews? If there is such an interest in spirituality, and spiritual experiences are more prevalent than is obvious, how can the Church tap into and facilitate an individual's spiritual pursuit?

Paul Hawker made some interesting observations in relation to why people were willing to share their intimate experiences with him. The key is in the manner in which he interacted with the individuals. He was interested and considerate. He listened to their stories as a "very open listener with no axe to grind or judgment to make".¹⁴ Like them he had struggles.

Many respondents to Hawker's research knew their accounts wouldn't be cross-examined, scrutinized or ridiculed by him. Instead they would be honoured and accepted. More than once he made the comment that there were few trustworthy spiritual guides who would seriously and thoughtfully consider these experiences. "Given the right questions and an

¹⁴ Hawker, *Secret Affairs*, pg 49.

empathetic ear, ordinary people will disclose spiritual experiences of an incredibly intimate nature".¹⁵

There are a couple of pertinent pointers given by Lee Strobel in relation to the church person interacting with "Harry", the unchurched person. A relational bridge needs to be built by which the church person can venture into Harry's environment.¹⁶ The relationship one establishes with Harry should be friendship-based and not project-based. There needs to be an authentic interest in Harry as a person and not just as an evangelistic 'scalp' or statistic. Regardless of whatever spiritual progress Harry may make, there should be an underlying genuine care for him.

Harry may have some legitimate questions about spiritual matters but he is under the impression that questions are not allowed in church. The advice given by Strobel is to validate the right to raise issues. Respond to the questions Harry raises with sincerity. This manner will encourage Harry to question and discuss deeper, significant issues.¹⁷

Strobel encourages the church person to ask Harry what he believes about God. Let Harry talk, listen to him with interest, request details, urge Harry to go deeper, ask him to define words he is using.¹⁸ This tack helps Harry process what he believes.

(These suggestions of Strobel may have been given within the context of evangelism, however, in principle, they are relevant to an attempt to bridge the church / society divide.)

The observations made by Hawker and the advice given by Strobel *exemplify core elements* of spiritual direction's *ethos*. It is the manner *in which a spiritual director ministers* and the objective of *that ministry that enables* spiritual direction to act as an interface between the apparently polarized worldviews of the Church and society. It is my proposition that as I draw from the ministry style of spiritual direction, I will facilitate an opportunity, for those I come into contact with each day, to experience a deeper spiritual encounter.

As a spiritual director I see my function to be that of a facilitator. The objective is to provide an environment in which a person feels safe to share his / her story. It is not for me to critique the merits of a person's life experience but to first and foremost provide a listening, non-judgmental ear. There is then the opportunity to ask questions and make observations which will assist the person to further process and engage at a deeper level with the impact of the life experience at hand. It is my understanding that through this whole manner of interaction, the Holy Spirit is able to speak/minister to the individual. The end result is that the individual has the opportunity to be drawn into a more profound encounter with God.

The context of the interaction between my work colleague and I may not be an official spiritual direction session, but that does not prevent me from employing spiritual direction-type techniques as we rub shoulders each day at work. As I interact in the manner of a spiritual direction facilitator, there is then the opportunity for a bridge to be constructed which will span the perceived divide between our worldviews. I have noticed a wariness toward me at work because I was initially introduced as having been a pastor. However, as I

¹⁵ Hawker, *Secret Affairs*, pg 49.

¹⁶ Strobel, *Inside the Mind*, pg 89.

¹⁷ Strobel, *Inside the Mind*, pg 55.

¹⁸ Strobel, *Inside the Mind*, pg 53.

have sought to exemplify a non-judgmental stance, then the perceived defensive walls constructed by my colleagues have gradually lowered.

The ongoing challenge is to be alert and sensitive to potential experiences of God in the lives of my colleagues which they may or may not recognize. From the recounting of these experiences I have the opportunity to facilitate a deeper engagement with the movement of God in their lives. This ministry of facilitation enables me to contribute to the Church's ability to respond to the interest in spirituality that is in surrounding society.

This paper highlights the journey I have taken, as I have reflected on the Church's ability to respond to society's interest in spiritual affairs. This journey has noted society's interest and experience in spiritual matters; despite first impressions to the contrary. It has explored the worldviews of both the Church and society. This has meant confronting some of the negative perceptions and experiences that members of society have of the Church. Despite apparently polarized perspectives, the Church is able to minister to society's spiritual interest. At the heart of this ministry is the ability to listen and invite further exploration of spiritual encounters. Spiritual direction's manner and ethos exemplifies such a ministry, and thus has the ability to act as an interface between the church and society.

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