

Developing a spiritual direction practice

by Vic Francis

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

I vividly remember the first pages of the first book I read in my training and formation as a spiritual director – and the main point I took from them. The book was *Soul Friend, Spiritual Direction in the Modern World*, by Kenneth Leech, and the point was that charging for spiritual direction “would have horrified the saints in all ages”¹. Other spiritual direction luminaries such as William Barry and William Connolly had a similar message of spiritual direction being “the one ministry that should be available to any Christian regardless of cost”². Leech, Barry and Connolly, it seemed, felt money would somehow sully this wonderful calling from God. My immediate thought was, “So how can spiritual directors live, then?” Surely they, too, have bills to pay? And if they can’t make it work financially, surely they won’t be able to practise? And if they can’t practise, surely their gift will wither and die?

This Special Interest Project seeks to explore how spiritual directors in 2020 and beyond can grow their practices, become financially viable and hopefully help their gift to flourish rather than wither and die. This is not a critique of Leech³, but an attempt to shine light on developing a practice in a 21st-century world where spiritual directors are increasingly private practitioners with no church or denominational backing. This SIP has been fashioned in two distinct environments – research from mostly overseas sources on how to set up therapeutic practices and a survey⁴ of 13 practising New Zealand spiritual directors⁵ to discover how they have developed their work.

My conclusions, explored in this SIP, can be summarised in three areas:

- Spiritual direction is a calling, not a business, so normal business models don’t apply.

¹ Leech, *Soul Friend*, Introduction, xvi.

² Barry and Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, p153.

³ In fairness to Leech, I reread *Soul Friend* in late 2020, and found it a brilliant work on the history and outworking of spiritual direction.

⁴ See Appendix 1 for the full survey.

⁵ Many thanks for the willingness, thoroughness and wisdom of Jenny Caston, Andrew Connolly, Sue Cosgrove, Andrew Dunn, John Franklin, Bruce Maden, Sheila Pritchard, Adrienne Thompson, Neil Vaney, Alice Wood and three others who wish to remain anonymous. They are a diverse group – in religious orders and not; women and men; experienced (mostly) and reasonably new; older (mostly) and younger. Their input makes this SIP possible.

- Spiritual direction could theoretically be financially sustainable – but, tellingly, no one is doing it.
- Spiritual direction, with other support, is an increasingly viable financial option and spiritual directors have a wonderful opportunity to be proactive in growing their practices.

Let's begin, then, with the important foundation of affirming that **spiritual direction is a calling, not a business, so normal business models don't apply.**

Most people train for and practise caring or therapeutic roles because of conviction and a sense of vocation, rather than as a business proposition. For spiritual directors, that call factor is perhaps even more acute and they are often prepared to make significant sacrifices to follow God's leading. For Auckland spiritual director Sheila Pritchard, the call led her to "reduce my salaried job at BCNZ [now Laidlaw College] to 50% – with the accompanying income loss". This is a common experience. Auckland's Andrew Dunn has never promoted his practice because he is "called to this ministry and I am prepared to let the Caller do the promotion", while Andrew Connolly, of Helensville, "follows my call – in all its breadth – and whoever turns up turns up". Bruce Tallman, in *Finding Seekers*, sums up a familiar and uncomfortable balance for spiritual directors: "There are two basic mistakes in building a spiritual direction practice: to do everything and expect your Higher Power to do nothing, and to do nothing and expect your Higher Power to do everything. Your practice is a genuine partnership between you and your Higher Power."⁶ Connolly, Dunn and Pritchard, and the other New Zealand spiritual directors surveyed, all need income of course – mortgages and rents, insurances and supervision, food and petrol. But the call means their practices will never be driven by a calculator and a business plan. If they were, though, they would discover **spiritual direction could theoretically be financially sustainable – but, tellingly, no one is doing it.**

Let me pick up a calculator on behalf of those who probably won't to work out how someone might survive on spiritual direction alone. For this exercise, I am going to see how a spiritual

⁶ Tallman, Bruce, *Finding Seekers*, e-book, chapter 1, paragraph 6.

director could earn the New Zealand median wage of \$53,000⁷ from his or her practice. I'm ignoring tax – which the wage earner and the self-employed spiritual director both have to pay, though by different means (PAYE versus tax on profits). I will, however, add business costs to the amount spiritual directors need to earn, something wage earners don't normally need to think about.

The 13 New Zealand spiritual directors I surveyed have a variety of understanding of their costs – for some the question is a bit of a mystery while others calculate them very specifically. For the sake of this exercise I will say a spiritual director needs an additional 30% for costs, or \$15,900 based on the median wage (a conservative figure when you think of holidays and sick days, renting premises, websites, their own spiritual direction and supervision, professional development, discounted and free sessions for those who can't afford it and the like).

For a director in New Zealand to earn \$68,900 (the median wage plus 30% for extra costs) in 48 weeks⁸ at an average hourly rate of \$75⁹ – he or she would need to see 19 or 20 clients a week, something none of my survey respondents is doing, including some very prominent spiritual directors¹⁰.

One Wellington spiritual director with 14 years' experience “personally can't see how one could make an income of \$60,000 a year”, while Andrew Connolly is more colourful: “Hell NO, and personally I wouldn't encourage it!” Connolly argues for a “blend of spiritual direction and other things . . . that is healthy and sustainable”.

Theoretically, though, it could be done. Twenty directees and twenty hours a week would make the average wage. Sounds quite good! But an hour of spiritual direction time doesn't represent an hour for the spiritual director – it's at least 90 minutes when you consider prayer, personal

⁷ <https://www.stats.govt.nz/topics/income> says the median wage in 2019 was \$1016 a week or \$52,832 a year, which I've rounded to \$53,000 for ease of calculation.

⁸ Actually, most spiritual directors find their directees drop off from early December to mid-February, so the potential weeks to earn a living are probably more like 42 or 43.

⁹ The 13 spiritual directors surveyed charge between \$20 and \$115, almost all with a sliding scale of some sort. I've settled on a median figure of \$75 per hour-long session.

¹⁰ The spiritual directors surveyed see between 6 and 50 directees a month.

processing and reading and writing notes before and afterwards. One experienced director, from Wellington, sometimes sees five people in a day but says she couldn't do it every day. "When you're trying to offer a conversation out of spaciousness and you're cracking it along . . . getting them out . . . cup of tea . . . a few minutes to read notes . . . five clients take about eight hours." The need for "spaciousness" is important – this isn't something you do on a production line. Aucklander Jenny Caston agrees, pointing out that even if you could find enough directees it would be impossible to "hold that number of stories per week".

So while theoretically you could be a self-supporting fulltime spiritual director, the fact that none of our leading practitioners is doing it suggests it's not practically feasible.

Let's, then, turn to exploring how **spiritual direction, with other support, is an increasingly viable financial option and spiritual directors have a wonderful opportunity to be proactive in growing their practices.** I will explore three key areas:

- Building your directee base.
- Deciding what to charge.
- Complementing and stretching your income.

I will then complete the project by offering 13 nuggets from the 13 directors surveyed.

So how do you **build your directee base**? The spiritual directors surveyed overwhelmingly find word of mouth works best. For some this is easier than others, particularly those who are more forthright, or who have a profile within the Christian community, or who already have a good number of happy directees. Easy or not, though, directors who want more directees must be proactive – developing that elevator pitch; creating websites¹¹ and social media channels; designing flyers and business cards; contacting pastors and churches to let them know they're around; running retreats, workshops or prayer days, which can be a source of new directees; listing on the website of the Association of Christian Spiritual Directors. Tallman says while "aggressive marketing" is inappropriate, growing a practice involves "constant recruiting . . . the

¹¹ Here are two to check out – creativeprayer.space and solace.org.nz

never-ending process of following new leads, trying new things and developing new referral sources”¹².

One area strongly recommended by writers on how to build a practice, but rarely pursued by New Zealand spiritual directors, is clearly identifying your target client base. This seems counter-intuitive when you’re rather desperate for *any* directees, but it is likely to pay off in the long run. Cristin Smith runs a multi-disciplinary practice in the United States called Saffron and Sage, whose services include spiritual direction, nutrition, yoga, psychotherapy, coaching and acupuncture. The practice has an “ideal client” named Saffron who is 35 years old, earns \$US100,000 a year, is entrepreneurial or professional, lives within a 10-minute drive and is struggling with hormones and anxiety¹³. While being so specific would be anathema to many spiritual directors who prefer to take who God sends them, Smith makes one especially important observation: “Your Saffron looks a lot like you”¹⁴. In other words, start with people you can relate to and, more importantly perhaps, who can relate to you. Business coach Lisa Van Allen believes the narrower the target the better – be it at-home parents, business leaders, pastors or whatever¹⁵ – while SDI chief operating officer Rory Briski encourages directors to know their ideal client’s age, gender, socio-economic standing, profession and social and ethnic background. Once you know that, he says “go wherever your client is”¹⁶ in terms of promotion, be it podcasts, Mailchimp or social media; letters, emails or flyers; radio advertisements, merchandise or Christian bookshops.

Another benefit of focusing on your ideal client is that it forces you to discover your own strengths. Spiritual director and author Teresa Blythe offers three helpful questions to hone your practice:

- What are my particular gifts as a spiritual guide?

¹² Tallman, chapter 3, paragraph 13.

¹³ *Making a Living as a Spiritual Director* webinar, episode 2.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, episode 2.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, episode 2.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, episode 4.

- What is my desire for doing spiritual direction?
- What is the world's need for what I offer?¹⁷

Out of such questions may come a mission statement and even a business plan, which can help the director maintain focus and provide an anchor in the ups and downs of establishing and developing a practice.

Deciding what to charge is a significant part of this process. Remember our calculation for a spiritual director to reach the New Zealand median wage is based on \$75 per session. Halving that amount will double the necessary contact hours; doubling it will halve them.

Kenneth Leech, as we have seen, believes we shouldn't charge at all. But that was back in the 1990s and earlier when spiritual direction was mainly the domain of clergy who were supported by their churches or denominations. Today it is the reverse, when most spiritual directors, in New Zealand at least, are laypeople who need to look after body as well as soul. Tallman observes well that people are "used to paying a professional fee for services for their car, teeth and bodies" and if people want your services "they will pay"¹⁸.

The New Zealand spiritual directors I surveyed have a wide range of fees. One newer director charges between \$20 and \$60; another, older and more experienced, between \$85 and \$115; another, also experienced, doesn't have a set fee but finds most of her directees pay around \$50. (Incidentally, male directors appear to charge on average more than female directors, but exploring reasons for this are beyond the scope of this project). Several directors charge more for directees whose visits are paid by third parties, such as churches or denominations. All are open to discussing lower rates for those who can't afford it, and many do some sessions for free or a minimal koha.

Most directors surveyed are in one way or another subsidised in what they do – some have offices in their church or home which saves on rent, power and water; some are retired and

¹⁷ Blythe, Teresa, *Spiritual Direction 101*, e-book, p150.

¹⁸ Tallman, chapter 17, paragraph 6.

receive a pension; some have significant others in their lives whose income allows them to pursue their call. These directors never have to face the real cost of their practice, while others without such buffers feel a greater financial strain.

When deciding what to charge, directors use a range of approaches – a sliding scale based on the ability of the directee to pay; a fee range where directees decide what they can afford; the exchange of the cost of an hour of the directee’s time for an hour of the director’s time; or a set fee that is clear from the outset. One rule of thumb is to set charges similar to comparable services – perhaps counselling or massage therapy – which helps settle the amount in the director’s mind and explain the cost rationale to a questioning directee.

Once the fees are decided, the director has the sometimes-nervous task of discussing money with the directee. The consensus is that it is best to raise the matter before the first session by email or flyer, or at the latest as part of the contracting conversation at the first meeting.

It’s important to remember in setting rates that directors can only bill for contact time. If we take the estimate, probably conservative, that a 60-minute appointment actually represents 90 minutes or more for the director, it means charging \$60 a session is effectively only \$40 an hour. This also means a spiritual director simply can’t see eight people in an eight-hour day – in fact author Lynn Grodski believes 26 hours is about the most a practitioner can manage¹⁹ in a week. Whatever the case, the director must have a cost structure to cover those unpaid hours.

Which brings us to the opportunities available for spiritual directors to **complement and stretch their income**. Not all the directors surveyed want or need this – some are content with their number of directees, resourced in other ways or simply trusting God for the right people at the right time. But for some directors, complementing and stretching their income could be a lifeline as they develop their practice, something Grodski says takes “three to five years . . . with diligent

¹⁹ Grodski, Lynn, *Building Your Ideal Private Practice*, e-book, p221.

marketing and good referral sources”²⁰ and Tallman puts at a critical mass of 40 clients, “when the practice seems to take on a life of its own and starts to run itself”²¹.

Suggestions to complement and stretch income include:

- Organise a co-operative of spiritual directors who share costs, ideas, refer each other directees and advertise in tandem.
- Continue to study and grow so you can spread the income net wider into areas like supervision, mentoring or consultancy.
- Reduce outgoings – shared office space, a room at a church, claiming tax concessions for fees, travel, resources, professional development and home work spaces.
- Run group sessions at a lower rate, but a higher return.
- Move discounted sessions to less attractive times, so the half-paying directee isn’t taking the space of a full-paying client.
- Ensure available hours suit potential directees – such as evenings and Saturdays.
- Develop a meaningful and energising mission statement – then pray your mission statement every day.
- Work on the business, not just in the business – set aside an hour or two every week to review, plan and brainstorm possibilities.
- Develop a list of potential clients and email them regularly with spiritually helpful ideas.
- Think outside the church. Many people who don’t identify as Christian have spiritual experiences which spiritual directors can help process.

Alice Wood, a recently qualified spiritual director in Wellington, has attempted to complement her spiritual direction practice by offering contemplative spaces and practices at Victoria and Massey universities. While responses have been low so far, she has grown through these

²⁰ *ibid*, p104.

²¹ Tallman, chapter 10, paragraph 20.

experiences and continues to pursue a simple philosophy of “saying yes to anything you might be invited to”.

All this requires spiritual directors to stretch into uncomfortable areas. Tallman: “As a spiritual director, you may know ten different ways of praying, but if you are going to operate a full-time practice, you also need a business plan, suitable location, knowledge of how to operate office equipment, liability insurance, financial record-keeping knowledge, forms and a system of record-keeping for clients.”²²

Which brings me to sage final words from the 13 New Zealand spiritual directors who contributed to this project. These are people worth buying lunch for to find out how they do it, but for now here are nuggets they offer for free:

Jenny Caston, Auckland: Invest early/often and be professional from the start. Take time to set up your practice, seek a mentor (canvass other directors/supervisors for how they do it, what’s worked/what hasn’t) and have robust processes/systems in place that are kept up to date.

Andrew Connolly, Helensville: Use what you have, where you’ve come from, who you are and grow from there.

Sue Cosgrove, Wellington: Take the call seriously, have a grounded rhythm of prayer/reflection, good supervision and personal spiritual direction, and hold it all lightly.

Andrew Dunn, Auckland: “Don’t get into it if you can possibly avoid it!” was advice I heard when setting out on ministry training. An SD ministry is too special and often too challenging to enter upon lightly.

John Franklin, Dunedin: Pray, pray, pray. If the gift and the call is there, the Lord will send someone.

Bruce Maden, Palmerston North: Talk to a very experienced spiritual director first and have such a person be your spiritual director or supervisor. It is amazing what begins to rub off.

²² Tallman, chapter 16, paragraph 19.

Sheila Pritchard, Auckland: There's no way to know if it will be sustainable until you test the waters. It has to be a passion and a calling and not just a source of income. It has to be a vocation not an occupation.

Adrienne Thompson, Wellington: Take every opportunity you can get! I am enormously grateful to the Wellington community of spiritual directors who mentored me into leading weeks of guided prayer and invited me to come and lead on retreats. That's how I got experience in a supportive community, and it was through those activities that I recruited my first directees and started the "word of mouth" that still brings me new directees today.

Neil Vaney, Wellington: Rely very much on providence. Let God bring the people that God finds.

Alice Wood, Wellington: There will be pressure from others or from your own insecurity to compromise on the core of what you offer – don't!

Name Withheld 1, Wellington: Don't do it for the money – and don't do it without money either . . .

Name Withheld 2, Auckland: Consult an accountant so you know what kinds of books you need to keep and what receipts to keep for expenses.

Name Withheld 3, Wellington: Ask what is sitting beneath this work that keeps it safe and stays within the lane. What am I taking to supervision, how honest am I being, how do I keep myself in love with this work? How do I be my cleanest, most coherent, most hospitable, safest self in this work with a nourished spirituality – however that looks.

In conclusion, this project has explored the challenges and possibilities inherent in developing a spiritual direction practice. I have recognised that in the long history of spiritual direction there are assumptions which work against such development, including reluctance to charge and a sense that we need to wait for God to send the right directees. While respecting that, I have explored ways in which directors can develop their practices to make them more self-supporting. Spiritual direction will never be a traditional business, but directors can be proactive in finding new directees, developing simple budgets and business plans, and complementing and stretching

their incomes. I trust this project will inform some and inspire others to develop their practices to be everything God wants them to be.

Bibliography

Books

Barry, William, and Connolly, William, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, HarperSanFrancisco, no publishing date included.

Blythe, Teresa, *Spiritual Direction 101: The Basics of Spiritual Guidance*, e-book

https://www.amazon.com/Spiritual-Direction-101-Basics-Guidance-ebook/dp/B079QKPXG9/ref=sr_1_1?dchild=1&keywords=teresa+blythe&qid=1587669396&sr=8-1

Grodski, Lynn, *Building Your Ideal Private Practice, A Guide for Therapists and Other Healing Professionals*, e-book

https://www.amazon.com/Building-Your-Ideal-Private-Practice/dp/0393709485/ref=tmm_hrd_swatch_0?encoding=UTF8&qid=1586981049&sr=1-3

Leech, Kenneth, *Soul Friend, Spiritual Direction in the Modern World*, Morehouse Publishing, Harrisburg, 2001.

Tallman, Bruce, *Finding Seekers, How to Develop a Spiritual Direction Practice from Beginning to Full-Time Employment*, e-book

https://www.amazon.com/Finding-Seekers-Spiritual-Direction-Employment-ebook/dp/B01MTA0MQC/ref=sr_1_1?dchild=1&keywords=finding+seekers&qid=1586980635&sr=8-1

Webinars

Making a Living as a Spiritual Director, SDI

<https://www.sdicompanions.org/product/making-a-living-as-a-spiritual-companion-i-recorded-webinar-4-parts>

Appendix 1
Questionnaire completed by 13 New Zealand spiritual directors

A. A little bit about yourself

1. How long have you been practising as a spiritual director?
2. How many clients do you see monthly?
3. How many clients would you like to see?

B. Growing your practice

1. What has been your most fruitful source of new directees?
2. Do you market yourself – website, mail campaigns, social media, church noticeboards etc? And what have you found most effective?
3. Do you supplement your spiritual direction practice with other complementary activities (eg, retreats, merchandise, counselling or one of the other listening disciplines)?

C. A little bit about money

1. What are your rates and how do you decide what to charge?
2. Do you find it difficult to talk about money?
3. How much does your practice cost to run?

D. Lessons learned

1. If you were starting out all over again, how would you go about setting up your ideal spiritual direction practice?
2. What is your best tip/greatest learning for someone thinking about setting up a spiritual direction practice?
3. Do you think it is possible to become a fulltime spiritual director in New Zealand?

E. Is there anything else you would like to add?