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Introduction: What is spiritual direction?

I was hungry for God in my early twenties. I bought a book with that very title, hoping that reading would lead me in the right direction as it so often had before.¹ When someone suggested spiritual direction, I had no idea what it was but was willing to try anything that might answer my spiritual desire for more. My first director was a male priest who sat behind his desk and listened to my faltering description of how I prayed. It was a very old-fashioned approach, but it sustained me enough to seek another director when he moved away. This time it was a very different approach, though with the same aim as before. My director, a lay woman, listened as we sat together in her sitting room, and occasionally interjected with a well-placed question. At the end she would gather up all the fragments of conversation and offer it to God with me. Since then I have had a number of spiritual directors from different spiritual traditions, all of whom have offered me hospitality and time in which to have a conversation about where God is at work in my life.


Spiritual direction is a relational ministry between two people whereby both are seeking to listen to the Holy Spirit. Directors make themselves available to those seeking direction, offering prayerful support and encouragement to help them listen and respond to God. It is God the Holy Spirit, in fact, who is the real director, so the essential foundation of spiritual direction is a three-way relationship. From the start there are three persons involved in this shared conversation, for conversation is the stuff of spiritual direction. The term describes a structured ministry of listening and spiritual formation on the part of the director, with the aim of enabling another Christian to grow in relationship with God and in obedience to God. A typical meeting for spiritual direction will last about an hour, and frequency



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of meetings can vary considerably. Often when a person is just beginning, there may be shorter gaps between meetings, perhaps four to six weeks. Later on many people find that three or four times a year is sufficient, especially if they have to travel some distance to see their director. Some relationships last for years and grow through many changes, but no one should feel tied to the same director for life. When embarking on spiritual direction for the first time, both sides involved should feel free to explore possibilities and say if they feel things are not a good 'fit'. Finding a director may be a challenge. Some Anglican dioceses hold lists of names of people who have undergone some training and/or have the reputation of being good directors, but often it is word of mouth that really counts. 'When you find a good person, make tracks to his door' is wise advice, and matters more than any courses completed, though these help to hone skills that may be already latent.

Signposts and guides



Throughout the story of God's involvement with humanity, one person has been used time and time again to point the way to another. The Bible, the Christian Scriptures, tell the story of this relationship between God and the world. In both Old and New Testaments we see instances of spiritual direction taking place, and we will examine some of these in the course of the book. In particular we will explore how the Gospels depict Jesus in his relationships with those he encounters, for above all he shows us the way to the Father and the way to live well.

With the birth of the Christian Church at Pentecost, the good news about Jesus began to spread, and in the book of Acts and the epistles we see how the first Christians learned how to put into practice what they had heard and understood about him. Christian faith according to the New Testament is something to believe and also something to do. It involves a new way to understand ourselves and who we are and also a new way to live. Most of the letters in the New Testament are written to churches, and the Gospels are understood to have arisen out of Christian communities. Between the Gospels and the letters is the Acts of the Apostles, which is the story of the early Church. We see that discipleship is something learned alongside others and that often it involves one Christian guiding another on




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the way. Indeed those first Christians were known as people of the Way. It is helpful to regard the ‘direction’ part of spiritual direction as a signpost along the way rather than as one person telling another what to do. Spiritual direction is not in the least about handing over responsibility for our lives to another human being. Keeping the Scriptures central to spiritual direction is an important means for both director and directee to remember this vital point. God desires that we should grow to be mature men and women, not kept in bondage to someone else’s agenda or subservient to someone else’s power.

‘Spiritual’ direction?

The term ‘spiritual’ is open to so many interpretations that many people feel that talking about ‘spiritual direction’ is altogether too confusing. ‘Spiritual’ may suggest the non-physical world but spiritual direction is concerned with the whole of life. The focus in direction is on prayer but that does not mean that only prayer is talked about – we do not pray in a vacuum. There is a story of a Russian *staretz*, or holy man, who was criticized for spending so long talking with an old woman – who had come to him for spiritual direction – about her turkeys. ‘But her whole life is in those turkeys’, was his response. Spiritual direction is for people who want to know God in their daily lives, whatever it involves and however mundane it may seem. Finding God in the ordinary is fundamental to knowing God personally and learning to hear God’s voice. Spiritual direction embraces the totality of life, and this is far more important than whether we are using a particular method or following a defined tradition.


The New Testament helps us to get a better understanding of the word ‘spiritual’ in the context of spiritual direction. When the apostle Paul writes about the spiritual life he uses the word *pneuma* and contrasts it with the flesh, or *sarx*, meaning life without Christ or the old self. *Sarx* is sometimes referred to as the false self as it involves a way of living that is inauthentic. This false self desires independence from God and struggles against surrender to God’s rule. One writer has described this false self as a fearful, protective, possessive, manipulative, destructive, self-promoting, indulgent, distinction-making self. The Christian life is about the transformation of this




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old self into the mature human beings that we are meant to be. For all of us there is work to be done regarding the old self!²

It is in the pages of the Scriptures that we find the antidote to the false self in the goal of the spiritual life. When Paul refers to the spiritual as opposed to the flesh, he was thinking of the whole of a person rightly related to God from their inner being, or hidden self or heart, where Christ dwells through his Spirit (1 Cor. 2.6–10). We are destined to be like Christ himself, conformed to his image, being changed little by little into his likeness (cf. 2 Cor. 3.18). God first of all came and shared our life in order to redeem us. ‘The Word became flesh and lived among us’ – or as the Greek literally translated means, ‘pitched his tent among us’ (John 1.14). It can be the experience of every Christian that God still comes to share our lives, but the goal is ultimately to be transformed into God’s own likeness. That will look different for every believer, for each one of us relates to God out of the unique way we are created, and it is the reason that the Bible does not simply set out a single blueprint for every person to copy. The task of spiritual direction is to understand what this work of transformation means in a person’s unique life and experience.



It is as we seek God that we discover our true identity. Even though spiritual direction involves us talking about ourselves, the focus is God and God’s action in our lives. As C. S. Lewis explained in *Mere Christianity*: ‘Your real new self . . . will not come as long as you are looking for it. It will come when you are looking for Him.’³ This is a lifelong process – the journey of life. Spiritual direction is just one way of enabling us to pay attention to the process of becoming like Christ and to learn how to live out of our true centre – that is, Christ – rather than our own selves, but its integrative nature is one of its supreme benefits for anyone wanting to take seriously the day-by-day process.



Spiritual direction and today’s spirituality

‘Spirituality’ is a term closely connected to this context, and we will use it frequently in these pages. It is a word that has become common currency in Western culture and, like ‘spiritual’, is open to wide interpretation. The dominant motif in the Western world is a marketplace spirituality with tempting offers, over-the-top promises, busyness


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and bustle, initiatives and performance factors all built in. It is full of options because it is a commodity where choice and individuality reign supreme. Much of what passes for spirituality today is less and less connected with the Christian tradition. Hence this book. Christian spirituality, properly understood, is nothing like the privatized, personal therapies designed to cultivate the self vying for attention in our culture. Given all this, 'spirituality' requires a working definition for its use here. At its most basic it can be understood as 'lived experience', but as with 'spiritual', it will be helpful to give it some clearer Christian content. It may be thought of as living out what I believe about God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This roots it in a theological context and also in that lived experience already referred to here. Spiritual direction is essentially a ministry of integration as it brings together spirituality with psychology, soul care – or pastoral ministry – and theology. It is not psychotherapy with a pinch of mysticism thrown in.

Terminology

I have decided to retain the term 'spiritual direction' for a number of reasons. First, it resonates across the Christian Church. Second, it connects the contemporary practice of spiritual direction with its long and established history in the Church. Third, properly understood, the word 'direction' vividly describes the practice of pointing the way to all Christian pilgrims. While the notion of journey has also become somewhat hackneyed, it is a deeply biblical theme in both Old and New Testaments and has meaning for countless Christians seeking to travel through life with Christ and who see themselves as pilgrims. 'Spiritual direction' as a description of journeying with others in prayer thus has a robustness about it and offers the opportunity to rescue the true meaning of both words in a biblical way. Using 'spiritual' in the way that the Scriptures use it challenges the hijacking of its meaning by those who want to empty it of its Christian context, while focusing on the signposting angle of 'direction' can enable both director and directee to remain dependent on Christ at all times.


Retaining the word 'director' raises the stakes in what can be expected from going to talk to one on a regular basis, and this will be explored in the chapters that follow. Determinedly hands-off



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directors are nevertheless seeking to point us to Christ, and besides offering the space to be in and the time to sit and talk or be still, all with unconditional acceptance, are there to be an icon of Christ to those before them. An icon is not the object of devotion per se but rather conveys something of Christ to the one gazing at it. St Paul wrote of the way that God has ‘shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ’ and how we are carrying this treasure within us ‘in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us’ (2 Cor. 4.6–7).⁴ There will be times when directees need direction in terms of spiritual wisdom. They need to know that the director is praying for them as well as listening with ‘an understanding heart’ (1 Kings 3.9 KJV; cf. ‘understanding mind’ NRSV). They may also need reassurance that God is still there, and look for such reassurance in the stance of the director. They will certainly want the director to be open to the Spirit and to exercise discernment.

*The renewal of spiritual direction in
the twentieth century*




When Kenneth Leech wrote his important book *Soul Friend* in 1977, he surveyed the current scene of spiritual searching in Western society. It was a time when many Christians were turning to Buddhism, Transcendental Meditation and Eastern mysticism in search of meaning and depth. The charismatic movement was in full swing and various radical theologies, not least liberation theology, were emerging. Leech noted three broad movements in operation: first, a search for the inner world of meditation, silence and contemplative prayer; second, a sense of the need for power and direct experience of the Holy Spirit; third, an increasing sense of the need to see the search for justice as an integral part of the gospel. There is little overt mention of the Bible in Leech’s analysis of the Church’s response, though he noted a sense of the Bible having ‘come alive’ for many affected by the charismatic movement, and he concluded that all three movements were in urgent need at that time of the orientation that spiritual direction could give. The inner search would end up in a blind alley with no help to interpret the experiences undergone, the charismatic movement risked leaving people in the place of

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darkness following peak experiences with little hope of spiritual progress, while the radical Christians involved in social and political issues could easily lose touch with their spiritual roots. Shallowness and rootlessness seemed to pervade the religious scene, and for Leech the main hope lay in personal guidance that took the form of spiritual direction. He declared passionately that: 'Never was spiritual direction more urgently called for than in the present climate of soul searching.'⁵

Leech's understanding of spiritual direction is firmly within the classical tradition of spiritual growth and spiritual guidance that is rooted in the Scriptures. He considers it to be an integral part of the pastoral work to which every priest is called, and that it arises out of prayer, study and ascetical theology.⁶ Leech's insistence that there is an inseparable link between doctrine and spirituality needs emphasizing. He reminds us that pastoral care and the cure of souls derive their dual emphasis of care and healing from Scripture. The Latin *cura* primarily means care but can also mean healing, and both ideas are held together in the image of the Shepherd, who is the one who feeds and nourishes the flock, strengthens the weak, seeks the lost, cares for the sick and binds up the wounded (Ezek. 34.3–4; 15–16). Ezekiel's model of the Shepherd is also concerned with the achievement of *shalom* (34.24). The New Testament builds on this, bringing together the themes of the wounded healer, the slain lamb, the stricken shepherd and the guide who nourishes the flock. Linking the work of the spiritual director to the work of the priest is an important reminder that spiritual direction is a ministry for the Church and exercised on behalf of the Church. It is, as Leech concludes, 'within the common life of the flock and of the Body that the work of spiritual theology takes place.'⁷

Like so many writers before and since who address the subject of spiritual direction, Kenneth Leech, himself an ordained priest, could take for granted a framework of Christian belief and faith that was everywhere implied. Biblical allusions, themes and narratives as well as discussion of theological concepts did not need explaining because these writers assumed their readers would know immediately to what they referred. Increasingly that is no longer the case. We no longer view the world through the lens of the Bible in the way previous generations did, even those among them who did not regard themselves as active Christians. Much has changed since biblical phrases



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pervaded common speech and the Christian Church had a much stronger hold on society than it does today. Yet Leech's predictions that spiritual direction would become more important have become reality. This requires some explanation.

Today's spiritual climate


The renewal of spiritual direction has taken place alongside social and cultural developments of the modern and postmodern world that affect us all. One of the reasons for the explosion of interest in spiritual direction is the enlarged understanding of what it means to be human through the development of the human sciences. Spiritual direction has learned a great deal about what goes on when one person talks and the other listens. Until the 1960s most spiritual direction was given to priests and people in the religious life by other priests and monks and nuns. It was also largely the preserve of the Roman Catholic Church and was certainly not something those outside the catholic tradition would consider as a means of spiritual growth. The ecumenical movement and the Second Vatican Council brought huge changes to the Church in the West and to the way Christians related to one another. Retreats and spiritual direction began to open up to lay men and women and not only to those from the catholic tradition. The retreat movement today counts Baptists, Methodists, Anglicans, Quakers and others among its members, many of whom have a spiritual director in addition to going away on retreat. There are training courses for people who feel called to this ministry, and many who practise are lay people. Some of the most popular courses in theology are those concerning spirituality and spiritual direction. There is an ever-growing number of books on the subject. Despite the training courses on offer, however, the demand for spiritual directors outweighs their availability. The renaissance of spiritual direction is something to be celebrated in the Church today. It represents a desire to know God, a desire to grow in the spiritual life, and is a healthy check on the general doom and gloom expressed concerning the state of the Church in the West. In the words of Gary W. Moon and David G. Benner in their book *Spiritual Direction and the Care of Souls*, the rediscovery of spiritual direction represents for many 'the recovery of the lost jewel in the crown of Christian soul care'.⁸

Spiritual direction today

Spiritual direction has ancient roots but it has also undergone change and development during its long history. Today it thrives in the Western Church in the mindset of a therapeutic culture. It has gained fresh insights from the world of counselling and therapy but it is neither of these in essence. Everywhere we look there are those who claim to have discovered the meaning of life, how to be happy and how to succeed. Questions about what life is for continue to exercise us as human beings whoever we are. We can choose to consult a life coach, a counsellor, a psychotherapist, even a hypnotist to enable us to discover our true potential. Spiritual directors may find themselves described as mentors, counsellors, guides or friends, and all of these suggest different models of operating; but spiritual direction remains something different from all these in and of itself. The main difference between spiritual direction and all other forms of talking therapies is that its purpose is focused on the person and on what God is doing in that person's life, so that he or she may be formed into the likeness of Christ. Spiritual direction helps us pay attention to what God is saying to us through our everyday experience, which includes prayer and listening to the word. What this looks like in practice will be different for different individuals, but what it means in essence is that God's agenda, not my agenda, is the focus of what goes on. This is deeply reassuring for anyone involved in spiritual direction, either in the giving or the receiving of it. While the relationship between the director and directee is important to the extent that it can make or break the experience of direction, it is not the point of the encounter. The director's primary task, in fact, is to get out of the way so that directees may hear the word of the Lord speaking to them.

Focus on experience


A further development in the practice of spiritual direction during the second half of the twentieth century was the shift in focus from keeping rules to reflecting on experience. In a postmodern world, experience is everything and it is valid because it is personal. My experience may be different from yours but I cannot challenge the truth of your experience any more than you can mine. At the same time much modern philosophy has been preoccupied with the question




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of whether we can experience anything outside ourselves. It seems a purely subjective thing, as indicated just now. How is it possible to discern whether someone's experience of God is real or not? Yet spiritual direction not only centres on human experience but on personal experience of a God who acts in the world in such a way that we may experience that action. The overall aim of spiritual direction is to help those seeking God to pay attention to their whole experience of life to understand where God is at work and so discern the next step of faith. We need a theology of the spiritual life and of spiritual direction that takes into account God's action in the world in a way that grounds the practice of prayer and the work of spiritual direction. What part do the Scriptures play in this? The premise underlying this book is that God has made God's self known in God's word, and that this is foundational to the ministry of spiritual direction. We cannot practise discernment unless we have a growing understanding of who God is and how God acts in the world.⁹

Experience and the Bible



The psalmist says 'you have set my feet in a broad place' (Ps. 31.8). To regard the Scriptures as the locus of God's self-revelation is in no way to close down the importance of experience or to argue that one must trump the other. Spiritual direction is about God and my experience in conversation. Directors and directees may have different theological perspectives and different degrees of awareness and ability to articulate theological concepts, but in Christian spiritual direction there is an assumption that both will share the Jesus story and the Christian creeds. Within this there needs to be room to move about, to breathe freely and to explore. If our theologies are too narrow, we may miss what God is up to in a person's life. Directors need to be open to having their theological horizons broadened as they listen to the experiences of God in the lives of those they direct. They need to be able to hold the range of ways of attending to Scripture across the various Christian traditions so that they can draw on appropriate verses and passages in ways that enable the directee to hear. The directee is seeking help to interpret their experience and so meet God in new ways. Directors need to ask themselves 'What counts as religious experience?' – for their directees will almost



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certainly be asking this. Do ordinary non-religious values and attitudes such as courage, selflessness and endurance count? And if so, how might they help us discern the work of the Spirit in us? How might they lead to a deeper experience of God? The Scriptures can help to guide our reflections here. They work not in isolation but hand in hand with recognition and gratitude for God's presence, the gentle but persistent questioning of a supportive director, the community of faith to which one belongs and the ongoing reflection of the person who is seeking.