

E- Group Spiritual Direction

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Literature Review for E-Group Spiritual Direction

Introduction

Spiritual Direction is a companioning experience on one's journey toward God. It implies a helping relationship that requires listening to another pilgrim whom God has created and loves (Hart, 1980), and it involves sharing one's awareness of God as well as God's action in one's life. An author and spiritual director who published numerous books as well as numerous booklets and articles, Alice Fryling, defines spiritual direction as an interpersonal situation in which one person assists another to discover God ever-present in one's life and to grow in the spirit of faith, hope, love, and prayer. Spiritual direction supports persons through difficulties, sufferings, and trials as well as during times of joy. Fryling believes spiritual direction is a way to assist people to discern and respond to the motions from God by using conversations to enable the directee to understand, objectify and articulate his or her own living of faith, hope and love (Fryling, 2009).

It is important to find a director with whom you are comfortable as you seek God's Spirit in the midst of a busy life. This director (companion) should be someone who can keep your word of life sacred, and offer spiritual companionship without judging your behavior – one who hears your truth with love. Spiritual companions break open the bread of their lives; serving with love and being themselves with all the humanness and struggle this implies (Hart, 1980). Through conversation and empathetic listening, both directee and director are able to discover the Spirit of God in their lives. "Spiritual direction is the contemplative practice of helping another person or group to awaken to

the mystery called God in all of life, and to respond to that discovery in a growing relationship of freedom and commitment” (Keegan, n.d., para. 3).

The most typical encounter for spiritual direction is the face-to-face private session. A directee can contact his or her pastor or confessor to share regarding the spiritual journey, or the directee can find an appropriate spiritual director and negotiate a schedule. However, “spiritual directors are not easy to find. Even when there are several priests at hand, this does not mean that they are all suitable as directors” (Merton, 1960). Group spiritual direction is also a possibility, but it is a less popular practice of this helping profession. Sean McCarty (Wicks, 2000) cites several positive comments regarding group spiritual direction in his study, stating that group spiritual direction can accommodate a greater number of directees as well as provide for more appropriate development in the sense that true Christian holiness has a communal dimension. Additionally, group spiritual direction can be a benefit and a source of support for directees as they hear the stories of others’ faith journeys and realize that they are not alone in their desire to draw closer to God. Groups of directees can grow in deeper appreciation for spiritualities and prayer styles other than their own. Nevertheless, there are difficulties with group spiritual direction. Objections indicate that group spiritual direction, even with small groups, could appear to be less personal. Also, directees might experience difficulty in trusting and in opening their hearts in front of a group of people. In some cases, there could be competition among directees as well as confusion caused by conflicting comments from other directees (Wicks, 2000). Devoting adequate time to each member of the group is a significant factor in planning group spiritual direction. One small spiritual direction group, containing five members and one director was

limited to a one-hour meeting. The small group meeting was scheduled so tightly, minute-by-minute, that there was very little flexibility for the Spirit to move among the directees (Fryling, 2009). It is no wonder that tension and frustration occurred.

History and Development of Spiritual Direction

Spiritual Direction is not new. It has existed since ancient times, however sometimes with different names and titles. Spiritual Direction has been called mentoring, personal guidance, and pastoral counseling. Individuals seeking spiritual guidance or direction would find a person, who would commit himself or herself to journey with the other as a spiritual guide (spiritual accompanist) to help the directee discover God's presence and ways. Aristotle (384 to 322 BC) wrote to Nicomachus, mentioning that he was capable of attaining a master's direction for living a virtuous life and of applying some sense of duty but he needed to find the right person for guidance (LaCoste, 2004). In this early time, people had already learned that having a spiritual guide could lead to good results. Later, the fathers of the Church adopted the concept of spiritual direction as an essential pastoral duty. In 354 AD, Augustine responded by writing to Paulinus of Nola and his wife Theresia, who were experiencing difficulties regarding how to conduct themselves in society, "Talk about it to some doctor of the heart (*cum cordis medico*) who is compassionate" (PL 33, 355) (LaCoste, 2004). By the fourth and fifth centuries, many persons were seeking spiritual direction from the desert fathers and mothers.

The development and spread of monastic life provided an ideal place for the growth of spiritual direction, and this practice of assisting in discovering God and God's ways remained a significant feature within the monastic tradition. "By the 6th century

this highly individualized charism had undergone many changes.... As the centuries passed, more active, non-monastic types of direction came into being, fluctuating between individualized and institutionalized models in tune with developing theologies of grace and of what it meant to do God's will" (Gratton, 1993). Later, Ignatius of Loyola developed the Spiritual Exercises as a contribution to guiding and enriching the quality of spiritual direction during retreat (Houdek, 1996). In the twenty-first century, directors and directees are challenged to realize the interconnectedness of all creatures:

No longer able to live a spirituality that sets them apart from their world and other persons in an isolated realm of mere interiority, contemporary seekers tend to view themselves as always in relation to, as inextricably connected with, the lived realities of their world.... Direction now involves not only one's relationship to the Sacred Otherness that underlies and upholds life; it is also concerned about one's openness to the environing universe and to cultural and social contexts. It questions us on issues of global justice and peace as well as on our response to immediate commitments embodied in family, work, and civic responsibility (Gratton, 1993).

Distinguishing Spiritual Direction from Other Forms of Spiritual Service

Spiritual direction continues to be a special helping activity, through which persons assist each other to discover God's action already happening within themselves. The directee experiences the promise of the Holy Spirit as the director acts as companion and guide. The basic attitude of this helping profession is to know that God is always with us as the director and the directee focus on the movement toward union with God. When the directee reaches the stage of surrendering to God, letting go of whatever might be blocking the relationship between herself or himself and God, there would be awakening and conversion (Merton, 1960). Spiritual direction should not be confused

with psychotherapy or pastoral counseling, which are also respectable helping professions.

Whereas the aim of spiritual direction is to discover the action of God in one's life, the aim of psychotherapy is to cure or heal the patient who is experiencing pain. The healer or doctor seeks to find ways to alleviate the pain and cure the malady. The basic attitude of this healthcare profession is for the healer or doctor to assist the patient toward self-acceptance and to enable him or her to function in society. When the doctor applies professional techniques with specific results, the patient may be healed, and the behavior may change. Psychotherapy can be a long term or a temporary service for those who need it (May, 1992). The purpose of pastoral counseling is to assist people with current problems. It is focused on intervention and healing in a Christian environment. People who seek pastoral counseling are experiencing some problem in life and they hope to get help from a professional person (teacher, counselor, priest, etc.), who will advise them and help them solve their problem. Generally, clients who seek pastoral counseling, do so in an effort to find what triggers the onset of their problems, pinpoint the source, and work toward solving the behavioral issues. A pastoral counselor frequently suggests additional resources, such as meetings or workshops to attend. Pastoral counseling usually is less than ten sessions and typically consists of one to three sessions (Stone, 1994). The basic attitude of this helping profession is to provide solutions for the immediate problems and assist clients to make changes to better their current situations (Atairs, 2000). For further comparison of these three helping professions, please see Appendices A and B.

Rather than attempting to cure people or to fix their problems, spiritual direction is simply offering each other the gift of empathetic listening. It is more of an on-going discovery of growing faith. Spiritual direction is a time to reflect and pause for the inspiration of the Holy Spirit who leads us to an authentic life worthy of God. The Holy Spirit is the love between God the Father and the Son. This love is so real that it overflows into the third person of God, whom we call the Holy Spirit. “The revelation of God is perfect and complete. To make it comprehensible to us, the Holy Spirit leads us ever deeper into the truth” (YOUCAT, p.3). The Holy Spirit promotes the Church and its mission. The Spirit leads us to a deeper communion with the Triune God. To assist those not of the Catholic faith to understand our terminology, close your eyes and be silently in touch with the God in whom you believe. Catholics articulate this same experience and reality as the Holy Spirit. Catholic Christians believe in the Holy Trinity: one God, but three persons. The Bible says, “No one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God” (1Cor. 2:11). The Spirit of God fills the whole world (Wisdom 1:7). The more open we are to the Holy Spirit in us, the more the Spirit becomes the director of our souls. Spiritual direction is geared toward growing in faith, and it focuses on the life of the whole person, emphasizing self-knowledge and detachment from one’s own ego in order to be free to find the will of God through the guidance of the Spirit of God (Houdek, 1996). “The whole purpose of spiritual direction is to penetrate beneath the surface of a [person’s] life, to get behind the façade of conventional gestures and attitudes which he presents to the world, and to bring out his inner spiritual freedom, his inmost truth, which is what we call the likeness of Christ in our soul....” (Merton, 1960).

Using the Internet for Small Spiritual Direction Groups

In *Digital Habitats*, Wenger points out how technology and a small group community can be complementary to each other (Wenger, E., White, N., & Smith, J. D., 2009). His social learning theory has been a great support to the new idea of using the Internet for small spiritual direction groups. Wenger claims that “community of practice” is not defined by the location; rather, it is defined by the prospective of learning together (Wenger, E., White, N., & Smith, J. D., 2009). I have blended an online model with some engagement in face-to-face sessions, hoping to create authentic meaning, identity, and growth within the small group rather than simply relying on the spiritual director for input.

The present literature review continues with research information directed toward utilizing cyber technology to provide spiritual direction to small groups of compatible individuals. In an effort to meet the spiritual needs of contemporary persons who are seeking companionship on their journey toward a closer relationship with God and are comfortable with both technology and group activity, a group spiritual direction program using the internet seems to be appropriate. The purpose of this e-group spiritual direction project is to use the modern attitudes of team work and group activity and to integrate aspects of electronic technology into the concept and practice of spiritual direction. E-group Spiritual Direction will not necessarily be appropriate for everyone, but it may be extremely helpful and comfortable for persons described by Webb: “...People don’t go to church to feel spiritual anymore. They go to church to feel bored. But they keep going every week just out of habit...” (Webb, 2005). Many people feel that their churches simply do not meet their needs, desires and hopes even though they have a strong

spiritual hunger. Webb feels that many churches are unable or unwilling to recognize the spiritual hunger and needs of their people; instead they continue to provide boring, outdated programs to explain theology without creating a different source of fellowship to encourage their believers to ask questions and express their doubts. There needs to be something more to fill the gap for alienated contemporary spiritual seekers (Webb, 2005). Small compatible spiritual e-groups can sometimes be the answer.

Most people naturally yearn to belong and to make connections for deeper relationships. The trend of establishing small groups based on shared values or lifestyles has been successful in today's society. The idea of small groups focused on nurturing souls and deepening relationships within Christian community living seems to be a worthwhile setting for spiritual direction. Strength within these small groups has been found in the dynamic of persons gathering together to experience God and deepen relationship with each other (Webb, 2005). These small groups were most successful when the participants were following the mutual journey of discovering God's work in their own lives. On the other hand, small groups tended to fail when they focused heavily on gaining intellectual knowledge and understanding as well as sacrificing for a goal. Ideally, small group interaction should be a place where people may drop their masks of performance and perfection – a place for people to be who they truly are and where they can express their deepest desires and dreams, believing that Christ will fulfill them (Webb, 2005). Technology is a way for people to talk with each other and to bond, and technology has been used successfully in the areas of religion and spirituality.

There are a number of experts and scholars promoting technology in the world of spirituality. The Pew Foundation's Internet and American Life Project found that 64% of

the nation's 128 million internet users have used the network for religious purposes. Bruce's studies of televangelism estimated that the most popular shows had an average audience of about 8 million, and that in a typical month at least 34 million different households watched at least one show geared to religious information and experiences. Email, the worldwide web, and power point productions are also frequently used for religious purposes (Wyche, Hayes, Harvel, Grinter, R. E., & CONFERENCE. (January 01, 2006). We learn from this study that many people felt more connected to the pastor personally via the internet than they did sitting somewhat anonymously in the churches. *Technology in Spiritual Formation: An Exploratory Study of Computer Mediated Religious Communications* shows that recent use of technology in religious and spiritual settings are in three general areas: education, preaching, and pastoral care. (Wyche, Hayes, Harvel, & Grinter, R. E., 2006). Technology in a religious and spiritual setting has been used to assist the needy. Church websites often support gift giving to help the affected areas. In one interview during Hurricane Katrina, the pastor of a small church described an upcoming trip to a nearby affected state to help victims. He described how he emailed his congregation with a request for items to give to the displaced families. "Email [was] sent to the whole congregation ... and on that email I said, 'I am leaving to Mississippi either Thursday or Friday of this week...I have got to have diapers.'" The people responded generously and quickly (Wyche, Hayes, Harvel, & Grinter, R. E., 2006). This use of technology has been positive; it has saved human-power at the same time that it has benefited many people because the communications were one-to-many. The cyber world can also be used effectively for spiritual direction.

One of the major concerns that has hindered spiritual directors from moving toward technological forms of spiritual direction has been their belief in the importance of observing the body language of their directees as they listen to their sacred stories, but such observation and interaction can now be accomplished through developing technology. Studies have also shown that internet-based communities are seen as new social spaces enabling human interaction in the digital world. Campbell found that for certain people, personal online context had created greater intimacy and value than the time spent in more traditional religious settings (Campbell, 2005).

John Roberto, the president and founder of Lifelong Faith Associates conducted an extensive study asking what Christian faith would look like in 2020 and how to begin to prepare to meet the spiritual needs of the people. This group reported that many people were hungry for God and the spiritual life but did not always feel satisfied with what they received from the organized churches. Theologians had a sense of urgency, feeling that they needed to come up with a variety of approaches to meet the diversity they were observing. One of the goals was to encourage young people to claim their own religious identities through online learning, including pod-casts, audio and video communications as well as printed resources (Roberto, 2008).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this literature review has brought me deep insights regarding the meaning of spiritual direction, both from the viewpoint of historical development and the comparison and contrast between psychotherapy and spiritual direction. It has also provided me with practical components for generating the birth of e-group spiritual direction research. The material persuades me to believe that e-group spiritual direction

can be an intertwining between face-to-face encounters and online blogging sessions. Reviewing this literature has really helped me understand and value the meaning and development of spiritual direction as well as gain up-to-date information in the area of technology being used for spiritual and religious purposes. E-group Spiritual Direction will not only meet both spiritual and efficiency needs, but it will also be a way to respect a form of learning of the new generation: the digital natives and immigrants. Copying a good model for group spiritual direction would have been very satisfying for me if I had been able to find one to suit the needs of my directees, but it appears that the Spirit of God is really moving toward an entirely new concept of integrating spiritual direction with cyber technology – certainly there is risk involved, but there is also great promise of sharing values of faith and Christian lifestyles online in an intimate way.

E-Group Spiritual Direction will not be a group for intellectual knowledge but a place where people may drop their masks of performance and perfection – a place for people to be who they truly are and express their deepest desires and dreams believing that Christ will fulfill them (Webb, 2005). It is to respond to those who naturally yearn to belong and to make connections for deeper relationships both with God and their fellow human beings. This e-spiritual direction group will exist based on shared values and / or lifestyles, and it will be focused on nurturing souls and deepening relationships. E-group spiritual direction will need strong spiritual leaders to guide the groups toward Christian community living where they can find energy with those gathering together to experience God and deepen relationships with each other in this constantly changing world (Webb, 2005). I am convinced that we should not limit the Spirit of God by making Spiritual direction solely face-to-face individualized sessions because the Spirit of God still has the

power to inspire, touch and act for an electronically-connected spiritual direction *group*.

I believe that we should give a chance to group spiritual direction, hand in hand with the cyber world, to produce new birth so that our spiritual hunger may be nurtured with a spark of hope to take us into the new century of spiritual jubilation.

Appendix A

A Comparative Summary

Pastoral Care

A mutual ministry

Deals with life cycle and has sustained involvement

Crosses all worlds and elements

Both initiated and responsive care

Includes all persona and ages

Impulse is often crisis driven, both situational and maturational

No contract or fee

Central agenda is overall conditions for growth and fulfillment of life centered in God

Focus is on greater self-understanding, agency, and formation of healthy ego

Begins with presenting concern and behavior

Explores the why, what, and how

Raises to consciousness the conversation between life experience, faith and culture

Both public and private/confidential encounters

Methods include listening, confession, diagnosis, analysis, interpretation, feedback, guidance

Exploration of options, provision of reality-based hope, and discerning God “in the midst of all of life”

Requires training in pastoral care and ethics

Spiritual Direction

A shared spiritual journey

Time-restricted and disciplined involvement

Deals primarily with the spiritual world

Responsive or by referral

Attends to particular persons, usually adults

Impulse is personal spiritual need

Contractual and fee/ donation for service

Central agenda is attending to the presence/action of God in the life of the individual

Focus is on developing a relationship with God and reduction of ego-dependence

Begins with experience and prayer life

Explores the who and where questions

Raises to consciousness the conversation between self-will and the will of God

A confidential and private encounter

Methods include listening, story-telling, feedback, discernment, direction

Exploration of what is happening to faith in the midst and affirming life experience as revelation of the divine

Requires training in spiritual direction and ethical guidelines for directors

Appendix B

The following table suggests some possible differences among spiritual direction, Psychotherapy, and Pastoral counseling:

	Spiritual Direction	Psychotherapy	Pastoral Counseling
Person seeking help:	Wants to discover action of God in life	Wants cure	Wants relief from troubles
Origin of the Process:	Experience of promise prompted by the Holy Spirit	Experience of pain	Experience of problem
Model of the Process:	Companion and guide	Doctor	Teacher
Relationship operative in the Process:	Two disciples moving toward the Lord under the guidance of the Spirit	Healer-patient	Teacher-pupil
Attitude of Helping person:	“God is with us”	“I am the Doctor.”	We can solve this problem together
Goal of the Process:	Movement toward union with God	Self-acceptance, ability to function in society	Reconciliation, guidance in decision-making
Method of the Process:	Surrender to God, letting go of whatever blocks union with God	Application of professional techniques aimed at specific results	Use of relationship with client for beneficial results
Dynamics of the Process:	Awareness, awakening, noticing, discovery, conversion	Healing of attitudes and behaviors	Solution of problems
Objective of the Process:	“The life I live now is not my own; Christ is living in me.” (Gal 2:20)	“I am now free, balanced and healthy.”	“Now I know how I want to spend my life.”

M. Scharf, ARTS OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTION COURSE, Lecture 19, May 9, 2009.