

Resistance in Pastors to Spiritual Direction

by

Jane Wilkinson

A Research Project submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the Spiritual Directors' Training Programme of [Spiritual Growth Ministries](http://www.sgm.org.nz) (www.sgm.org.nz).

Introduction

This topic emerges from reactions of some ministry friends to my decision to train in spiritual direction. Along with positive ones, disinterest, suspicion, ignorance and even hostility were also among their responses. Given that this process is about deepening a person's intimacy with God, I would be forgiven for assuming that pastors (clergy/ministers) would be the first to be cheering its resurgence, then lining up to be in spiritual direction or to train in it. Or would I?

The Problem Of Pastoral Ministry

Howard Rice sees scripture clearly defining the principal task of a pastor as 'equipping the saints for the work of ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ' (Eph 4:12).¹ And Kenneth Leech insists that 'formation and the building up of the Body of Christ cannot be interpreted in terms of numerical increase but of inner spiritual maturity'.²

Herein lies the problem. Out of the very real need to address complex pastoral issues, to practice more safely and to lead largish churches, pastoral ministry has become increasingly more 'professional'. Leech talks about the growth of the clerical profession saying 'More and more since the Second World War, and particularly in the United States, the clergy have come to be seen in professional, largely managerial terms. In a strong critique of the professionalisation of the ministry, the late Urban Holmes pointed out that such a model led to the serious narrowing of ministry and to the neglect of such areas as the sacraments, prayer, and the priestly role of pointing to the transcendent.'³

With the good this has brought there has also been pain and loss.⁴

Peterson's dismay is evident as he writes:

'...pastors are abandoning their posts, left and right, and at an alarming rate. They are not leaving their churches and getting other jobs.... But they are abandoning their posts, their *calling*. They have gone whoring after other gods....Matters of God and the soul and Scripture are not grist for their mill.'⁵

Many pastors today are characterized by busyness and multi-tasking. Of busyness, Peterson comments:

'if I vainly crowd my day with conspicuous activity or let others fill my day with imperious demands, I don't have time to do my proper work, the work to which I have been called. How can I lead people into the quiet place beside still waters if I am in perpetual motion?'⁶

¹ Howard Rice [The Pastor as Spiritual Guide](#) p20

² Kenneth Leech [Spirituality and Pastoral Care](#) p129

³ Leech, op.cit.p128

⁴ 'Ministerial competence is important. Pastors must possess some gifts that they can develop into real abilities in order to serve the church. But abilities themselves are not the primary gifts pastors have to offer. Abilities do not form the basis for ministry. We can get caught up easily in the effort to validate our ministry by results. Success can become an idol to which we cling in order to keep going.'

Rice, op.cit p36

⁵Eugene Peterson [Working the Angles](#) p1

⁶Eugene Peterson [The Contemplative Pastor](#) p19

In the same vein, Leech writes:

‘some clergy...seek to solve, or escape, the problem of identity by accumulating more and more jobs.... clergy rush about doing more and more, while the spiritual quality and intensity of the Christian community suffers neglect and ossifies.’⁷

Of huge concern is that this increasing busyness and multitudinism has a devastating effect on the pastor, his or her family and their congregations. Disillusionment, stress, exhaustion, illness and spiritual and moral decline are all too tragic and common.

Having considered that there may be a problem in the role and identity of pastors, now what? How can pastors live and minister in such a way that nurtures faith as food for the soul?

Pastoral Work – Soul Work

Brian Hamilton’s research convinced him that Spiritual Direction can be a model for all that one does in pastoral ministry be it preaching, worship, management, visitation, whatever. He concludes by saying:

‘Those of us in pastoral ministry seek to model our lives on the life and ministry of Christ. What I notice Jesus doing is listening to the souls of those he met. In his conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well, with Nicodemus, and with the centurion who came seeking healing for his daughter, he is caring for the soul. When the cure of souls becomes the centre of what we are about, rather than techniques in ministry, I am sure we will see new life begin to flourish in individuals and in the local church *and in the pastor* (italics mine).’⁸

This antique phrase ‘cure of souls’ has been rediscovered for our times. Peterson describes it as ‘the scripture directed, prayer-shaped care that is devoted to persons singly or in groups, in settings sacred and profane. It is a determination to work at the centre, to concentrate on the essential.’⁹

Rice comments ‘the principle tool of pastors is not a particular skill or technique; it is our very being. The principal tool for the work of pastoral ministry is one’s own faith.’¹⁰ He goes on to articulate the twin aches of modern people: ‘cosmic loneliness’ and ‘a yawning sense of meaninglessness’. ‘Only the pastor’ he writes, ‘can help persons find deliverance from these aches’.¹¹

I am seeking to describe a metaphor here of the pastor as a spiritual guide. One who ‘assists people in the ongoing renewal of their faith,’¹² who ‘keeps the community (of faith) attentive to God’.¹³ This essential work of curing souls is ‘a way of life that uses weekday tasks, encounters, and situations as the raw material for teaching prayer, developing faith, and preparing for a good death.’¹⁴

⁷ Leech, op.cit. p129

⁸ Brian is the Vicar of Holy Trinity Anglican Church in Tauranga, New Zealand and a year ahead of me in Spiritual Direction training. His research is entitled ‘Spiritual Direction as the Model for Pastoral Ministry’.

⁹ Eugene Peterson [The Contemplative Pastor](#) p 57

¹⁰ Rice, op.cit. p35

¹¹ Rice, op.cit. p36

¹² Rice, op.cit. p45

¹³ Eugene Peterson [Working the Angles](#) p2

¹⁴ Eugene Peterson [The Contemplative Pastor](#) p59

A Case for Spiritual Direction at the Heart of Pastoral Ministry.

If the above is true, then it follows that a pastor must attend to his or her inner life. I appreciate the way Flora Slosson Wuellner treats this by pointing her readers to that powerful, poignant Resurrection story in John's Gospel: 'The risen Christ builds the fire, cooks, and serves breakfast to the disciples; he heals Peter's guilt and shame – all *before* he sends them out to feed the hungry sheep of the world'. (See John 21:4-19.)¹⁵

Wuellner reflects back to how she entered pastoral ministry without ever thinking or asking how she was going to be nourished. 'No one had pointed out that if a shepherd is not fed as well as the sheep, that shepherd will begin to starve and may end up devouring the sheep.'¹⁶

So what can those in pastoral ministry do to keep being renewed and fed? Rice suggests that: 'regular spiritual practices protect people from the tendency to exhaust themselves and deplete their spiritual resources....regular attention to the care of our own souls may be the only way we can continue the practice of ministry without losing our souls in the process.'¹⁷

Leech makes some helpful comments on the importance of prayer for the pastoral role: 'The prayer life of the pastor is of fundamental importance if our ministry is to be an authentic reality, not just a job. For prayer and the life of the spirit is the one area where we can't go on faking it – as we can, to some extent, in parish administration, preaching and other areas. In prayer, we are stripped naked, reduced to confusion and bafflement. In prayer we enter the desert of the heart's pilgrimage, the dark night of the soul's journey. No authentic ministry can be built on prayerlessness. It is from our prayer that we discover the inner resources to be shepherds of the flock of God.'¹⁸

When I look at the biblical and historical models of spiritual guidance,¹⁹ and add to this, the struggles that pastors face in this time, I find myself strongly persuaded that pastors need to be in some form of spiritual direction.²⁰

¹⁵ Flora Slosson Wuellner Feed My Sheep p21

¹⁶ Wuellner, op.cit. 20-21

¹⁷ Rice, op.cit. p161

¹⁸ Leech, op.cit. p94

¹⁹ Ray Simpson writing about Celtic insights into spiritual mentoring cites John as a soul friend to Jesus. 'John became sensitive to the heartbeat of Jesus, and Jesus shared intimately with him.' P38. Simpson goes on to explain how the Trinity is a model of soul friendship. 'God is one love expressed as three eternally loving selves.' (John's gospel chapters 14-17 give many examples of the triune God working alongside one another) p40. Other soul friendships from early biblical times are recognized by Simpson also: Moses and Joshua, David and Jonathan, Ruth and Naomi, Barnabas and Saul, Paul and Timothy. The early Christian communities in Ireland placed a very high value on soul friendship. Aelred who was born at Hexham in 1109, wrote in his treatise Spiritual Friendship:

Friendship is nothing else but wisdom, and the person who abides in friendship abides in God, and God in them...He is entirely alone who is without a friend. But what happiness, what security, what joy to have someone to whom you dare to speak on terms of equality as to another self; one to whom you can unblushingly make known what progress you have made in the spiritual life; one to whom you can entrust all the secrets of your heart and before whom you can place all your plans.' p16

Ray Simpson Soul Friendship

²⁰ 'There may not be many people who are formally trained and experienced, but there are many people who have the *potential* to be a good spiritual director...people who reflect the basic qualities of a good director.'

Tilden Edwards Spiritual Friend p120

Rice agrees with me!

‘Every pastor needs someone who can act as a mentor or wise guide. The work of ministry is too dangerous to attempt by oneself. Our highly valued individualism has come back to haunt us; the price we pay for our freedom is loneliness and isolation. Many pastors have no one to whom they can turn for advice, correction, or encouragement. The spiritual guide requires a guide. Most pastors need to find a spiritual director who will help us stay spiritually alive.’²¹

Why then do so many pastors refuse to see this ministry as important or necessary for them?

Resistance in Pastors to Spiritual Direction

These last two sections draw heavily on insights from spiritual directors/mentors whom I consulted for the purpose of this research.²² Their insights are not scientific, but they come widely shared within this work.

I’m looking chiefly at resistance in pastors to the overall concept of spiritual direction i.e.: why they don’t want to ‘go there’. Resistance for pastors once in spiritual direction is explored to a lesser extent.

Gerald May describes resistance with the terms ‘defensiveness’ or ‘avoidance’ toward anything that is ‘spiritually threatening’.²³ I appreciate that not all pastors are resistant to spiritual direction and neither is their resistance once in spiritual direction anything out of the ordinary. I apologize in advance for the generalizations in the following comments and I acknowledge that many pastors will not fit these – though I hasten to add they will have friends and colleagues who do!

The main cause of resistance that the interviewees came up with is one of control. Many pastors are used to being in control - they are leaders and bosses, trained in things spiritual. From them advice is sought and ministry dispensed making them the expert²⁴. (There will understandably be resistance to a lay spiritual director, no matter how qualified or skilled, if they are considered professionally unequal.) One director observed that ‘pastors need to attain rather than be helped’. They don’t find it easy therefore to share what is most essential to them and neither are they comfortable with another ‘exposing’ them. It is threatening to have cherished beliefs challenged. Spiritual direction may be about letting some of these cherished beliefs go which is a scary proposition for many where they have become their security in difficult territory. Peterson sees the issue at heart is one of pride which can isolate a person thus perpetuating the problem.²⁵

Being still with another runs contrary to the professional, managerial culture of ministry where the focus of prayer is outward not inward. Reflective, contemplative prayer is not a high priority when one is coming from this angle. Again, it is hard for a pastor to admit that they don’t do much private praying.

²¹ Rice, op.cit. p162-3

²² I consulted with ten experienced spiritual directors/mentors who are all in New Zealand. They mostly work ecumenically and all see a good number of directees who are in pastoral ministry. I am very grateful for their feedback, and wisdom.

²³ Gerald May Care of Mind Care of Spirit p83-112

²⁴ One director noted ‘most pastors are ‘Christianized leaders’. Probably the true nature of servant is confused. There are many constructed defences to maintain this leadership persona’.

²⁵ Eugene Peterson Working the Angles p119

It seems that spiritual direction is still not well understood even amongst pastors. One director responded by saying ‘many pastors have no idea of the potential offered in this process. Those that do respond to the process have said that it has ‘become their lifeline’’. Older clergy were not introduced to spiritual formation in their theological training (unless Catholic) and younger ones have been trained along the more managerial model. There are misgivings around its ‘catholic-ness’ making it too different or not relevant to many pastors. Even the name ‘Spiritual Direction’ has an implication that one is going to be propelled along paths they have no desire to go.²⁶

Establishing a good working alliance requires certain ingredients in the director as well as the directee. ‘It is a contractual arrangement and both parties must be confident that as personalities they can relate’. Some directors are quite staid looking, the majority are women (and the bulk of pastors are male), they use different language, many are quiet (that silence thing is a problem for a busy person), a certain mystique seems to surround them (the majority of males don’t do mystique) and they don’t always lay their theological cards on the table. One of the directors interviewed commented that for him ‘a broad spectrum spirituality and theology in a director created suspicion’. Another difficulty in establishing rapport is a negative attitude of some spiritual directors towards the church and its leaders. Finally, where there is a financial cost for spiritual direction, a pastor will weigh it up against supervision, buying of books, attending conferences etc. Whether or not these things are valid, they can be perceived as undermining the approachability, trustworthiness and even credibility of the director and the spiritual direction process.

Keeping the above in mind, one can understand why a pastor, who is required by their denomination to go on retreat or be in spiritual direction, can be quite resistant! We look briefly now at some additional resistances which could occur within spiritual direction.

Expectations of what happens in spiritual direction can create resistance. A pastor may want to use the session more along supervision lines, relating it all to church. The non-directional more introverted style may be difficult to enter into for some who are seeking answers (i.e.: what is God saying to you personally, not what is God saying for your next sermon or for a difficult pastoral task). Around this issue of control and power, one director commented that game playing can occur where no one wins but which the pastor thinks he or she does. I wonder too, if there is an expectation that spiritual direction could be a forum for theological debate. Another director who is also clergy noted that ‘pastors are handling holy things all the time and may therefore become blasé about the sacred’. He also commented that pastors are so focused on helping others, they find it difficult to accept help themselves: ‘it is as if he cannot receive for himself, cannot accept the gift I am offering him’. Perhaps there could be issues here around unworthiness to receive special attention from God.

In a chapter entitled *Spiritual Exhaustion and Depth Renewal*, Wuellner comments how fatigue can be a powerful factor in avoidance of prayer. She says ‘the more tired we are, the less we want to put out our hand to take the very things that will help us’.²⁷ She goes on to ask some powerful questions which highlight elements of resistance associated with fatigue. For example:

- Do I find it difficult or humiliating to receive help from others?
- Do I always feel I should be doing more?

²⁶ Sadly there is a misunderstanding of the essential nature of spiritual direction which according to Barry and Connolly is ‘help given by one Christian to another which enables that person to pay attention to God’s personal communication to him or her, to respond to this personally communicating God, to grow in intimacy with this God, and to live out the consequences of the relationship’.

Barry and Connolly [The Practice of Spiritual Direction](#) pg8

²⁷ Wuellner, op.cit. p112

- Are my prayer life and spiritual disciplines themselves stressful and tiring?²⁸
- Have I increasingly abandoned daily intentional communication with God?
- Am I entering a time of deep inner shift and growth?
- Do I give myself regular 'Sabbaths'?²⁹

Response

This final section considers how pastors may be brought on board with spiritual direction. The following are some practical suggestions from the directors interviewed which may assist spiritual direction work with pastors:

- The relationship must be built on trust and confidentiality (often for pastors it is helpful to see someone right outside their circles).
- The pastor-directee must not be put in a unique position because of their role, nor should the director be intimidated.
- An understanding and honouring of their particular faith traditions and belief structures is important.
- Knowledge of Myers Briggs and enneagram material, especially around growing into one's shadow is helpful.
- An appreciation of the unique issues for pastors, for example: loneliness, relationship between church 'successes' and 'failures' and personal spirituality, the responsibilities and burdens they carry and will bring to direction.
- 'Listening to God' for some pastors is about finding material for the next sermon. Spiritual direction needs to encourage grappling with the material personally on the way to preaching it!
- If there is not a good rapport or working alliance, this needs to be acknowledged and a new spiritual director found. The current director may be able to make other suggestions.
- Simply listening – listening our pastors into life.
- And lastly a suggestion from Howard Rice - helping the pastor directee identify what nourishes and what tempts.³⁰

Some concluding thoughts to finish.

Spiritual direction is a gift and ministry of grace. Most directors I know are gracious people. The ministry is a quiet one, behind closed doors. As a result it is still not widely made available or accessible for people, including pastors. I wonder if spiritual directors could benefit this work by believing more deeply in the treasure they have and then offering it to our pastors.³¹

At an institutional level, I feel there needs to be greater educating in our theological colleges and denominational leadership, to counter misinformation and ignorance around spiritual direction. It would be wonderful if these leaders became convinced to the point that spiritual direction becomes a priority for them and their pastors. Where this happens, laity will be sure to benefit.

²⁸ Wuellner comments: 'Often the very spiritual responses intended for our renewal have become sources of burdensome fatigue. This is especially true if we become rigidly inflexible in our personal prayer discipline, or if we have entered a discipline unsuited to our personality and our unique way of responding' Wuellner, op.cit. p115

²⁹ Wuellner, op.cit. pgs109-124

³⁰ Rice, op.cit p165

³¹ In offering it to our pastors I envision some of the following needing to happen: information sharing about spiritual direction and how it can be accessed (brochures, websites, email contact, books); making personal contact with pastors and their spouses; sharing with the local ministers association, denominational leadership and theological colleges.

Unfortunately, as things stand, should laity come into spiritual direction, the inverse is not always true.

And at an individual level, pastors need to be convinced that it works. Peterson comments: 'The first thing that I noticed after I began meeting with my spiritual director was a marked increase in my spontaneity... I found myself more free.'³²

My mind runs wild imagining my pastor friends more free and spontaneous. And then how this in turn may affect their relationships with God, their loved ones and their churches...

³² Eugene Peterson Working the Angles p119

Bibliography

Barry, William A. & Connolly, William J. The Practice of Spiritual Direction. Harper: San Francisco, 1982

Edwards, Tilden. Spiritual Friend. Paulist Press: New Jersey, 1980

Leech, Kenneth. Spirituality and Pastoral Care. Sheldon Press: London, 1986

May, Gerald. Care of Mind, Care of Spirit. Harper: San Francisco, 1982

Peterson, Eugene H. Five Smooth Stones For Pastoral Care. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1980

Peterson, Eugene H. The Contemplative Pastor. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1989

Peterson, Eugene H. Working the Angles. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1987

Rice, Howard. The Pastor as Spiritual Guide. Upper Room Books: Nashville, 1998

Slosson Wuellner, Flora. Feed My Sheep. Upper Room Books: Nashville, 1998

Simpson, Ray. Soul Friendship. Hodder and Stoughton: London, 1999

Not surprisingly, Peterson exploring "the Art of Spiritual Direction" in *The Contemplative Pastor* (1989) was a book that I had a hard time setting down. *The Contemplative Pastor* is broken into three sections. In the first, "Redefinitions," Peterson explored There are few writers I enjoy more than Eugene Peterson. His love for God, for people, and for language routinely meet on the pages of his books. I was recently moved by his description of the "unbusy pastor" in his later memoir *The Pastor* and had some familiarity with the idea of the apocalyptic pastor. Briefly, in Peterson's thoughts, pastors should be characterized by settledness, margin, and patience, working without frenzy in the day to day life of the church and of the world. The second section--the longest--is called "Between Sundays".