

**The Possibilities and Limitations
of Group Direction
in the Parish Setting**

Essay for
Theory and Practice of
Spiritual Direction

MA in Christian Spirituality

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Square brackets within quotations [] indicate my additions.

The Possibilities and Limitations of Group Direction in the Parish Setting

Although many different Christian traditions are used to the concept of Spiritual Direction, of having a director, and seeing them regularly; there are many other Christian traditions that either do not have this as part of regular practice, or indeed would consider having a director as something of an anathema.¹ With this in mind, the primary purpose here is to discover to what extent the processes of *direction within a group context* may be more applicable or useful in some parish or congregational settings. Can a group help an individual in their own personal ‘direction’, or in what ways can a whole group discover discernment for a joint or communal decision?

In his definition of ‘Spiritual Direction’, in Gordon Wakefield’s Dictionary, NW Goodacre, calls it ‘The pastoral guidance of souls by counselling and prayer through the illumination, grace, and the power of God the Holy Spirit.’¹ His view is partly influenced by Frank Lake, and goes on to identify the role of the spiritual director as: ‘a physician of souls, one who seeks to diagnose the condition of the soul with its graces and ills, and to assist it into the way of growth.’

Columba Carey-Elwes defines a Spiritual Director as: “One who is chosen by a person wishing to progress in the life of the spirit, not only for advice, but often as one to be obeyed, in view of the fallible judgement we ourselves have.”² Its purpose, in Goodacre’s view ‘The most positive use of spiritual direction is in two specific areas: understanding ourselves in the light of God; and growth in the life of faith and

¹Goodacre, NW; on ‘*Spiritual Direction*’ in Wakefield, Gordon S, Ed, - *A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* - 1983; p 115

prayer. The counsellor helps the soul to see itself and through direction shows the way to fullness and joy.’³

The purpose of Kathleen Fischer’s work⁴ is to bring a feminist perspective to spiritual direction. In its traditional roles, she includes discussions on spiritual direction itself, models of the church growth, the experience of God, the role of Jesus, modes of prayer, and discernment. She also covers a number of areas not frequently covered in discussions: namely power, anger, violence against women, and women’s spiritual legacy.

Spiritual direction for Kathleen Fischer “is a conversation in which a person seeks to answer the question ‘What is spiritual growth, and how do I foster it in my life?’ ”. However, she adds, “I am aware of the problematic nature of the term ‘spiritual direction’. As many authors have pointed out, neither ‘spiritual’ nor ‘direction’ aptly describes what it has become today.”⁵ This is clearly an area with not only a number of perspectives, but a sense of movement and development over time.

The style and phraseology that Goodacre and Carey-Elwes have used, though only written in the mid-1980s already sounds very dated. So is there a need for direction anymore? Carey-Elwes is sceptical that we have grown out of the need for direction: “today the temper of the times is to proclaim that as Christians we have come of age, we are mature and that therefore so tight a rein is no longer desirable... ..but the old model has its strong adherents...”⁶ This was perhaps partly a reaction

² **Cary-Elwes**, Columba - *Experiences with God: A Dictionary of Spirituality and Prayer* - Sheed & Ward, Creechurch Lane, London; 1986; p 51

³ **Goodacre**, NW; in - *A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* - p 115

⁴ **Fischer**, Kathleen, RSM - *Women at the Well: Feminist perspectives on Spiritual Direction* - SPCK London; 1989

⁵ **Fischer**, Kathleen, RSM - *Women at the Well*; 1989 p 3

⁶ **Cary-Elwes**, Columba - *Experiences with God*; 1986; p 51

against what Jacqueline Hawkins identifies as the “1970s tidal wave of literature and process [that] swept religious communities towards more enlightened shores - or so they were led to believe” - here she is discussing the phenomenon of Communal Discernment.⁷ There is just a hint in Hawkins and Carey-Elwes, that in the post-Vatican II years, perhaps that particular pudding has been over-egged. Can some forms of group direction still have a place - and what about in new contexts, other, for example, than amongst the religious communities, where so much of the early literature is pointed.

Looking Only Unto Jesus

For some within Protestant circles, the Reformation was partly to establish that no longer was there a need to have ‘priests’ interceding on their behalf, intervening in their lives, or interpreting God to them. Instead, just as the Temple curtain was torn in two at the point of crucifixionⁱⁱ, so the way for each individual soul was now directly open to God through what Christ had achieved. No longer was there a need for mere human beings to guide them in the spiritual life - the Holy Spirit of God would be their Guide.

It is still easily possible to find individuals and groups who subscribe to a greater or lesser extent with such dogmas, but what is more illuminating is to see the way members of such communities consider spiritual growth. Many in free Evangelical congregations, or what were called ‘house churches’ in Britain in the 1970s and 80s, would have a strong concept of a personal salvation, and of God revealing himself through the Holy Scriptures.⁸ ‘Quiet Time’ and Bible study personally or corporately would be encouraged. Yet, as Goodacre quaintly puts it ‘Spiritual direction is not necessary for all souls but it is very desirable for some and

⁷ **Hawkins**, Jacqueline - *Foreword* - The Way Supplement 85 Spring 1996, p3

it can be a great help to many others.’⁹ How might spiritual direction be applicable to these who resist? Or how can one encourage a greater percentage of those who sit week by week in the pew to take a more active personal interest in their own spiritual development?

Roots of Direction

In exploring the possibilities of group direction, Andrew Hamilton studies the history of ‘Communal Discernment’ from an Ignatian perspective using the metaphor of racehorse and draughthorse.¹⁰ This is for two reasons: *firstly*, Ignatius and the early Jesuits were involved in a particular, significant communal discernment near the beginning of the movement’s history (covered in more detail by David Lonsdale later); and *secondly*, this was then followed up by Pedro Arrupe, Jesuit Superior General, who encouraged *communal discernment* as a way forward for the Jesuit community in 1970/71. Here *Communal Discernment* is in a way allied to, or may be used for the purposes of, communal decision-making. As a tool, with its history rooted in the Ignatian *Exercises*, it had all the potential to be a fast thoroughbred, with excellent bloodlines, and many years fine breeding through practice. But some, having made use of this principle, have judged the tool of communal discernment to be a slow, heavy and cumbersome instrument in use, more akin to a draughthorse. Perhaps it is this that caused Goodacre and Carey-Elwes their questioning earlier. Indeed perhaps their feeling is that what is being flogged was turning out to be a dead horse altogether. Let us study the animal of Group Direction a little more closely.

⁸ e.g. in McGrath, Alister E. - *Christian Spirituality* - Blackwells, Oxford; 1999, p 18, 19

⁹ Goodacre, NW; in - *A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* - p 115

¹⁰ Hamilton, Andrew - *Correct Weight For Communal Discernment* - The Way Supplement 85 Spring 1996 p 17

All For One and One For All

Group discernment can operate in several different ways. Firstly (with my apologies to Alexandre Dumas) there is the *All for One* principle (or perhaps slightly more accurately *All for One by One*); where the whole group is involved in helping one person discern God's personal leading for them. In the group context, this is usually when the whole group has gathered to help each member in turn discern, and one will follow another in the listening/discerning process. Kathleen Fischer calls this *Group Support for Individual Discernment*.¹¹

Next is the *One for All* principle, where one facilitator or consultant is helping the whole group discern corporately. In practice, this is one of the most frequently used principles, and much of the literature on group direction or discernment is about how a facilitator can best do this.¹²

The third group discernment principle is the *All for All* principle, where all the members of the group have the authority and responsibility to be involved in discerning the future for the whole group: what Howard Gray calls *Communal Discernment*¹³. With his differing title of *Group Spiritual Discernment*, Franz Meures defines it as "a process of clarification during which a group formed by faith in Christ tests the movements it experiences, whether they arise from internal or external causes, to see if they lead towards or away from God, in order to be able to decide how it should proceed before God."¹⁴

Of these three, the area that I am most interested in exploring, is the *All for One* principle, with members of the group helping each other in turn. It seems to me to have real potential in helping those in ordinary parochial settings who are either

¹¹ Fischer, Kathleen, RSM - *Women at the Well*; 1989 p 129

¹² For example Lonsdale, David - *Dance to the Music of the Spirit* - p105

¹³ Gray, Howard J - *Foundations* - The Way Supplement 85 Spring 1996, p 10

unaware of, or resistant to, the idea of ‘traditional’ one-to-one spiritual direction, to perhaps try something new in a context of mutuality. Those familiar with perhaps the home-group or Lent group, may be able to see how this could be used as the starting point for this sort of an exploration of faith journey.

Spiritual Exercises

Ignatius was powerfully moved by an early vision and experience of the Holy Trinity at a monastery near Manresa, which became a significant foundation to his understanding of the Godhead, and to his own work of ‘helping souls’.¹⁵ Perhaps the Trinity, with relationship at its heart, could be perceived as Ignatius’ driving force; a model for group direction? David Lonsdale would caution us, asserting that Ignatius’ understanding of the Trinity would have been primarily ‘economic’; that is in paying attention to the creative and saving work of God in the world and in history, that is in the ‘economy’ of salvation. Ignatius is more interested in God’s dealings with men and women in history in the world which they inhabit. This contrasts with other modern theological models, describing the Trinity as ‘immanent’ - to do with the relationship between the persons of the Triune God within the Godhead.¹⁶

Hamilton points out that though the Ignatian ‘Election’ and ‘discernment of spirits’ are both resources usually used within the context of an “individual who stood in solitude before God” he goes on to say “But they could serve also as resources for people who wished to reflect and pray together about what they should do”.¹⁷

¹⁴ Meures, Franz - *The Ministry of Facilitation* - The Way Supplement 85 Spring 1996, p67

¹⁵ Lonsdale, David, - *Eyes to See, Ears to Hear: An introduction to Ignatian Spirituality* - DLT, London; 2000; p 71

¹⁶ Lonsdale, *Eyes to See, Ears to Hear*, p 72

¹⁷ Hamilton, Andrew - *Correct Weight For Communal Discernment* - 1996; p 19

Indeed, the early Jesuit community were able to put into practice a communal understanding of the established individual discernment process in 1538/9, one which we can value here, as Lonsdale outlines for us: (Lonsdale's points¹⁸, my contraction)

- 1) A common basis for the discernment (here to search for the will of God for the future of the whole Jesuit community)
- 2) Individual members had differing ideas how to achieve this end
- 3) Each member committed to assiduous prayer
- 4) They used all natural means of enlightenment, being fully informed
- 5) As objectively as possible, each came to their own conclusion
- 6) They came together to share their personal conclusion of the communal discernment

The primary purpose here was for a group to make a communal decision about God's guidance for their community in a very significant and permanent way.

Lonsdale goes on to use something of the same methodology for more ordinary 'daily life' contexts. As an example, he takes a parish 'Social Action', or 'Peace & Justice' group. He notes that even here the basic elements of communal discernment have a place:

- the fundamental aim of attending to the presence and action of the Spirit;
- regular prayer throughout the process, nourished directly or indirectly by biblical texts;
- communication with a wider group of people, either because they have a particular expertise or because their lives are likely to be affected by the outcome of the discernment process;
- acquiring and pooling information with regard to the circumstances about which choices have to be made;
- willingly sharing with each other experiences of consolation and desolation and other considerations that are relevant to the discernment process;
- sensitivity to the movements of consolation and desolation of the group as a whole; and when a decision is being or has been made, noticing and appreciating signs of confirmation or its opposite.¹⁹

Thomas Green and John Carroll Futrell are concerned though, and identify that selflessly committing to a corporate decision is the hardest part of true communal discernment within a community. Is it practically possible at all? Most of the examples they came up against indicated not. Green was not even sure he could

¹⁸ Lonsdale, David, SJ - *Dance to the Music of the Spirit* - DLT, London; 1992; p103ff

include communal discernment as part of a course syllabus he was teaching.²⁰ What of others experience?

Making Groups Work

Three conditions, says Rose Mary Dougherty, are essential to the life of a group, in the context of Group direction. “Members must agree to commit themselves to 1) an honest relationship with God; 2) wholehearted participation in the group process through prayerful listening and response; and 3) opening their spiritual journeys to the consideration of others.”²¹

Kathleen Fischer points us towards Women’s Circles as an example of new models of spiritual direction; a popularised aspect of the application of the feminist empowering of women, but with particular relevance to our discussion for a number of reasons. *Firstly*, Spiritual direction has been very male dominated for centuries, and a feminine perspective has value. *Secondly*, it is more than just pop psychology to pick up on the sort of work represented by Carl Jung, with aspects of *animus* and *anima*, masculine and feminine within each of us. *Thirdly*, statistically most churches have a predominance of women in the congregation, and anecdotal evidence would suggest that there are more women seeking directing, than men.

Women are now beginning to [recognise] the importance collaboration among women and the creative potential of women’s friendships and support groups, [finding] companionship for their spiritual journey in a circle of women rather than in one director. [This can work through] listening, clarifying, offering suggestions and alternative interpretations for experience, facilitating exercises that will help to draw out ideas and images, putting persons in touch with spiritual resources.²²

¹⁹ Lonsdale, David, SJ - *Dance to the Music of the Spirit* - 1992; 112

²⁰ Green, Thomas H. SJ - *Weeds among the Wheat: Discernment; Where Prayer and Action Meet* - Ave Maria Press, Notre Dame, Indiana U.S.A.; 1984 p 184, 185

²¹ Dougherty, Rose Mary S.S.N.D. - *Group Spiritual Direction*: 1995 p 36

²² Fischer, Kathleen, RSM - *Women at the Well: Feminist perspectives on Spiritual Direction* - SPCK London; 1989 p 21, 22

Fischer claims these women's groups to be based on "women's unique strengths and world view". I am sure that the discovered merits are not exclusive to the feminine gender alone, nor only to uni-sex groups.

Rose Mary Dougherty puts a high emphasis on what she calls *Faithful Looking*. Taking her cue from Mother Julian of Norwich, who when asked by a friend how she prayed, said: "I look at God, I look at you, I keep on looking at God", Dougherty says "Put simply, the group's task is to keep on looking at God for each person in the group."²³ She has helped design a process that is initially quite regimented, and certainly initially, externally facilitated. This is perhaps partly to help keep the group members 'on task', especially in the praying department, when it is too easy to be distracted.

Fischer claims that "This group approach to spiritual direction renews an emphasis that has long been a part of the tradition" and she in turn quotes Tilden Edwards claim that group spiritual guidance is the standard form of guidance in Christian tradition. Current forms demonstrated include "groups gathering for faith sharing, scriptural reflection, singing, and prayer. As [Tilden Edwards] notes, the richness of insight available in a group can outstrip that available in a one-to-one relationship".²⁴

Adrian Van Kaam, quoted by Fischer, says "[Private] direction is less common, not available to most Christians, filled with risks, and by no means necessary for every person who wants to grow in the life of grace".²⁵

²³ Dougherty, Rose Mary S.S.N.D. - *Group Spiritual Direction*: 1995 p 37

²⁴ Fischer, Kathleen, RSM - *Women at the Well*: 1989 p 22

²⁵ Van Kaam, Adrian - *The Dynamics of Spiritual Self Direction* - Dimension Books; 1976 p 384: quoted in Fischer, Kathleen, RSM - *Women at the Well*; 1989 p 23

Kathleen Fischer identifies a number of key reasons why groups can be an especially helpful form of spiritual companionship: (she would maintain, from her feminist perspective, especially for women; but I would argue, again, for many men as well). Her phrase is often ‘women’s circle’ but one could just as well say ‘group’, or even ‘mixed group’ in most contexts; indeed I have in places redrafted her gender identification to make it more mutually inclusive. Her three primary reasons are:²⁶

- 1) In a circle...giving and receiving can take place in a mutual way. One is no longer helper or person being helped, but both. [Fischer maintains, though I disagree, that this is even the case in groups where one person regularly serves as the facilitator.]
- 2) Groups provide many opportunities for being understood and affirmed ... When stories of faith are shared, [people] find that others have had experiences similar to theirs; this commonality of experience enables them to feel normal, to see the connections between their personal and cultural experiences. In the absence of such companionship, [people] often feel isolated, crazy and different.
- 3) Many forms of prayer can be most effectively taught and learned [and practiced?] in a circle or group. ... They enable [people] to experience inclusive language and alternative forms of prayer and worship. [See note on cultural and ecclesiological/denominational non-transferability, below²⁷.]

Prayer is the Key

Prayerful silence is key to any form of group direction. This is not just a snatched prayer: “The fact that the participants firmly believe in the presence of the Spirit, and sing the *Veni Creator* or spend a few moments in silent prayer at the beginning does not automatically make the process one of ‘discernment’” David Lonsdale reminds us.²⁸

Rose Mary Dougherty is even more prescriptive, especially where silence is concerned. She specifies groups as consisting of three to four people. Meetings start with about 5 minutes of silence, followed by the invitation for one member to share something. The sharing may be 10 - 15 minutes. This is once more followed by

²⁶ **Fischer**, Kathleen, RSM - *Women at the Well*; 1989 p 23

²⁷ In this and other passages, Kathleen **Fischer** makes a number of additional points that relate either to women in an American cultural context, or a Roman Catholic context, that are not so universally transferable. I have tried to include the ones that are; she would no doubt disagree with both my delineation and conclusion!

silence, for 3 - 4 minutes, and then up to 10 minutes of response from the group. Depending on what has been shared and how it is received, this may be interspersed with more silence. Certainly after the response, there will be more silence, during which the individual who has shared, and the appropriateness of the responses, is prayed through. At the end, the cycle is repeated for another individual in the group.²⁹

The prayerful course of silence, listening, silence, responding, and silence - is one that is used in other places and contexts too. It is the basis, for example, of the Christian³⁰ Marriage Encounter process. One of its strengths is that it protects the right of the weaker person to be as fully heard as the stronger, in any given context. It has the power to liberate; for differing views to be held, and even accommodated.

Groups of course go through changes in ‘group dynamics’: processes of exploration, highs, and lows. These are perhaps the very things that the Ignatian tradition calls ‘discernment’, ‘consolation’ and ‘desolation’. Lonsdale notes how “spiritual moods, like other kinds of moods, are contagious. One person’s joy, peace or hope, anxiety turmoil or despair can be caught by others, as easily as catching a cold.”³¹ (This effect can also be multiplied if the discernment has as its endpoint a whole group *All for All* decision. When it is going well, everything is fine. “... But when one persons desolation is caught by others, the whole group can be very easily plunged into a downward, destructive spiral, because each person’s desolation reinforces and confirms that of the others.”)

Janet Ruffing, quoting Gerald May, speaks of another distraction; that of the “Endlessly inventive evasion” that can take place in direction. There is a particular

²⁸ Lonsdale, David, SJ - *Dance to the Music of the Spirit* - 1992; p 100

²⁹ Dougherty, Rose Mary S.S.N.D. - *Group Spiritual Direction*: 1995 p 38, 50

danger, or ease of evasion in a group setting, that can easily lead to a lack of challenge etc. within the group. Ruffing relates it to “the whole area of the dynamic of fear of and flight from intimacy with God - the holiness of God, the unpredictability of God, and even the tenderness of God - occurs because our small, conditioned sense of self is threatened in both obvious and subtle ways by such encounters.”³²

A group of theology students can easily distract the tutor week after week to discuss, instead of the set Doctrine topic on the curriculum, another facet of the Trinity. ‘Endless inventive evasion’ - until late on in the course, one student finally cracks and says ‘please can we get back on topic?’. The tutor surprises them all by responding that the Trinity of course *is* the topic, as it is foundational to all sections of doctrine. To study the Trinity is to study Doctrine. Just occasionally, this is what happens with a wise facilitator; though the group can diverge and procrastinate, with the slightest of nudges they can lead the whole group back, to not only where they should be, but upon to the next plane as well.

Times and Seasons

As with any director/directee relationship, the usefulness of the arrangement can diminish with time.³³ Three ordinands in a ‘triad’ or ‘prayer triplet’ on leaving theological college may find meeting together mutually very supportive in initial months and years of ministry, but find that differing spheres of work, new relationships, deepening and developing spiritualities, changed family circumstances and children may well make a very helpful relationship redundant or untenable.

³⁰ There are many denominational flavours of Marriage Encounter

³¹ **Lonsdale**, David, SJ - *Dance to the Music of the Spirit* - 1992; p 108

³² **Ruffing**, Janet, RSM - *Spiritual Direction: Beyond the Beginnings* - Paulist Press, Macarthur Boulevard, New Jersey, U.S.A. 2000; p 33, and also Chapter title

This should come as no surprise: how to spot, and how to manage the ending of a director/directee relationship, is indeed the subject of much of the literature. It underlines the importance of having clear expectations and boundaries set at the beginning of any such relationship. Andrew Hamilton, following his horseracing metaphor, called them the ‘race rules’³⁴; David Lonsdale³⁵ also mentions a number; and within the group context, Rose Mary Dougherty gives very comprehensive guidelines³⁶.

As an example of the dangers of not setting out clear parameters, Hamilton outlined one situation in which the Superior of a religious community gave permission for a group discernment process to take place, which ran its course, and drew its conclusions. Because the outcomes were outside the plans the superior had personally had in mind for the community, they were asked to repeat the process (presumably until they came up with the ‘correct’ response).³⁷

Flawed Jewel, or Diamond in the Rough?

There are times when group discernment becomes impossible. Andrew Hamilton points out that even when group participants have significant unity of purpose in many areas, there are times when because of severely diverging views, group discernment will not be able to come to satisfactory conclusion. He cites the example of chaplains to the forces in the Vietnam war, and pacifists.³⁸ This of course breaks one of the fundamental principles of Group discernment in the first place, as

³³ e.g. **Dougherty**, Rose Mary - *Group Spiritual Direction: Community for Discernment* - 1995, p22

³⁴ **Hamilton**, Andrew - *Correct Weight For Communal Discernment* - 1996; p 21

³⁵ **Lonsdale**, David - *Dance* p105

³⁶ **Dougherty**, Rose Mary - *Group Spiritual Direction: Community for Discernment* - 1995, p38ff

³⁷ **Hamilton**, Andrew - *Correct Weight For Communal Discernment* - 1996; p 21

³⁸ **Hamilton**, Andrew - *Correct Weight For Communal Discernment* - 1996 p 23

we have already found - if there is no sense of unity of purpose established first, then nothing but a divided outcome can result.

Thomas Green also warns us of another potential flaw. “To have a discerning community, you must have discerning persons, discerning members of that community... Thus it is dangerous to speak of communal discernment if the members of the community in question are not, individually, praying and discerning persons.”³⁹

This provides us with something of a dilemma in the local parish context. There is a danger that the commitment of members of a group may not be strong enough to each other; the prayerful discernment not be deep enough to carry the experience. Certainly, the casual group that has little set agenda, or little guidance from some sort of facilitator at least initially, is likely to do more damage than good to the individuals within it. No wonder Green and others would like to place Communal Discernment in a box marked ‘Dangerous, Handle with Care’. Certainly many a fragile, and not so fragile, individual has been damaged through opening themselves up in a setting that did not transpire to be secure for them, as an individual, or for themselves as part of a community.

However, this does not negate the fact that, with proper initiation, and maybe some external assistance from a facilitator or ‘director’ to get the process started, within an agreed structure: small group discernment may be a powerful aid to both individual and corporate spiritual development.

³⁹ Green, Thomas H. SJ - *Weeds among the Wheat: Discernment; Where Prayer and Action Meet* - Ave Maria Press, Notre Dame, Indiana U.S.A.; 1984 p 178

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Endnotes

ⁱ For some groups who would find Spiritual Direction anathema, they may still espouse the principle of 'Shepherding', which became popular in the late 1970s, where each individual was cared for, becoming the spiritual responsibility of a more senior Christian within the congregation. In some places this became so extreme that the home-group leader, or other 'shepherd' had control over who an individual spent time with, or even if they were allowed to come and go as they pleased; all in all making the severity some other (dare one say 'catholic') groups look tame by comparison!

ⁱⁱ Matthew 27:51; Mark 15:38 etc