

The Relevance and Engagement of Spiritual Direction for Generation Y

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Introduction

In this project, I will be looking at the value of spiritual direction to Generation Y people. I will first define key terms, 'spiritual direction' and 'Generation Y' people. I will then review research literature with regards to the characteristics of Generation Y people particularly with regards to the spiritual aspects of their personalities. Using a questionnaire, I have asked Generation Y people who have participated in spiritual direction how valuable their experience has been and how it has impacted on their spiritual growth. In the survey I have also checked out what the respondents understand spiritual direction to be. I have deliberately sought responses from Generation Y people who have been to different spiritual directors.

Motivation for choice of topic

My motivation is personal. Even though I am not Generation Y, I regret not beginning spiritual direction when aged 30 to 40. In hindsight, spiritual direction would have been beneficial to me personally, professionally and with regards to my spiritual growth.

I also know of a number of Generation Y directees who have found spiritual direction a hugely beneficial experience to navigate life's journey with a spiritual director.

As an ex-school Principal, I have seen a renewed emphasis in New Zealand schooling on 'wairua' in education as students (and teachers) embrace a culturally responsive learning style. Also, a restorative approach to discipline rather than a punitive approach has similarities to spiritual direction, as students and teachers are more used to listening to each other's stories. This is underpinned by a narrative style to relationships. I have a hunch that the climate is right for this generation to consider and engage with spiritual direction. My wondering is that there are small numbers in Generation Y who are partaking in spiritual direction and I would like to examine reasons for this situation in the hope that more Generation Y persons will engage with spiritual direction. I also want to learn from these Generation Y people who have involved themselves in spiritual direction.

Definitions

In order to address the relationship between Generation Y (GenY) and spiritual direction it is important that each of these terms is defined.

People in Generation Y were born between 1981 and 1996. This means they are currently between 25 and 40 years old. Another label that has been given to this age group is Millennials and for the purpose of this project they are considered identical and can be used interchangeably.

My definition of spiritual direction is based on Bakke (2000) and Barry and Connolly's (1982) definitions. Spiritual direction is the help given by one more experienced travelling companion to another traveller which enables the seeking traveller to pay attention to God's personal communication and this gives opportunity for hope, healing and growth and a deepening love and communion with God.

Spiritual direction is always storytelling and is always a story of a journey Guenther (1993). Guenther further elaborates that "the spiritual director is only a fellow traveller- at a different place on the road perhaps, but a fallible and ordinary traveller, nevertheless".

Spiritual Direction in this context does not mean telling the same story repeatedly, but the offering of a channel through which people can discover themselves and clarify their own experiences within a spiritual context (Nouwen, 2014, p. 42).

Characteristics of Generation Y

First, it is worth noting that Generation Y is the first generation to grow up with the internet, cell phones and digital communication. 'Digital natives' is a term often used to describe people who grew up tech-savvy.

Howe and Strauss (2009) identified seven distinguishing characteristics of Generation 'Y'. Those traits were special, sheltered, confident, team-oriented, achieving, pressured and conventional.

Further to this, because of the way many Generation Y were parented, they tend to encounter challenges with problem solving, accepting and learning from mistakes, failure and having realistic expectations.

Generation Y are regarded as overconfident youngsters, better educated particularly with regard to technology, but managing them in the workplace poses real challenges as they expect promotions, fun at work, flexible work schedules, lots of vacation time and more money. Generation Y persons say they want more work life balance (Hansen, 2022) (Oevreboe, 2018).

It is interesting to note that employers of Generation Y people are encouraged to champion 'technology-free' periods of time and encourage opportunities to practise stillness and self-reflection through journalling or creative arts. (Eckleberry-Hunt J., 2011).

Employers or managers of Generation Y individuals need to be good at forming mentoring relationships. Successful managers set expectations and patiently mentor millennials to goals. The ongoing, robust relationship with a mentor or a coach provides a safe environment for nondefensively hearing and growing from feedback (Caro, 2006).

Spiritual direction seems a useful way for Gen Y people to examine themselves and to experience a type of mentoring that has a spiritual focus.

Spirituality and Generation Y

Gen Y people are doing spirituality in a way which cannot be detached from their calling as sacred activists (Eves, 2020). This generation has a readiness to work the walk in the messy and complex world they live in. Rarely is 'God' or 'church' mentioned but instead the ideas of community, authenticity and spirituality are used to describe the places and the relationships these people are building.

Also, Gen Y are not afraid to mould language to suit their understanding of spirituality. One example relates to their definition of leadership roles. They use words such as gatherer, seer, maker, healer, and steward. (Huxley, 2019)

Another characteristic that Gen Y is using in building their own spirituality is that of telling their stories. By doing this Gen Y is engaging with spirituality in creative and responsive ways. This generation is engaging with spirituality in a way different to what is offered by traditional structures. Traditional structures use sermons and hymns often devoid of personal and contemporary stories.

Another key aspect is that there are growing number of people who are children of interfaith and intercultural marriages. Many have been born in one country, grown up in another and educated in a third. They were influenced by a huge range of different belief systems and practices. Also, the use of social media hooked them up to a global reality.

They were often less focussed on difference and much more concerned about the world and how to change it.

A phrase that Gen Y people can use is ‘dissolving binaries’. (Huxley, 2019) This relates to relationship with gender which moves beyond the dualism of male and female into an understanding of gender as a continuum. But this generation is dissolving boundaries in other ways. Examples include boundaries between action and contemplation, leader and follower and physical and spiritual.

A significant number of Gen Y have a real desire to fully live spiritual values in everyday life. They take their faith from the church to the workplace. ‘This is where I see the grace operating – in “the space between vision and actuality” (Huxley, 2019)

In one extensive survey (Michael, Webb, & Singleton, 2007) it was noted that only 40% say religion is very important in their lives. However, the same survey revealed that 80% of millennials believe in God and increasing numbers identify with statements like ‘I feel a deep sense of spiritual peace and wellbeing’ or ‘I experience a deep sense of wonder about the universe’. Many call themselves spiritual but not religious.

Two of the motivations for Generation Y people turning towards spirituality are the real concerns about materialism and a desire to be environmentally concerned for the world.

The connection between Generation Y and Spiritual Direction

The literature research I have undertaken indicates that spiritual direction is well suited to the characteristics shown by Gen Y people. It is interesting to note that in the workplace, researchers recommend the value of mentoring Gen Y employees. While mentoring involves more advice from the mentor and some degree of fixing, mentoring is also about the value of a continuing relationship over time and the willingness to hear stories. The emphasis on relationships and storytelling is very much at the heart of spiritual direction.

Also, research literature tells us Gen Y people describe themselves as ‘spiritual’ rather than ‘religious’ and prefer a more intimate relationship with regards to things spiritual than a church setting.

In preparing for this paper I conducted a survey of Gen Y people who are currently involved in spiritual direction and asked questions about the value of that experience particularly with regards to spiritual growth. I approached seven spiritual directors to ask their Generation Y directees to respond to the survey and e-mail myself their answers. I had ten responses and some directees had had more than one spiritual director. Most responses were by e-mail but some opted for an interview.

Barriers to Spiritual Direction for Generation ‘Y’

From the survey described above, I have had oral and written feedback from Generation Y people that have indicated a desire for spiritual growth. However, some people are unclear on what ‘spiritual direction’ is and the term ‘director’ indicates a hierarchical structure that in reality does not exist. Some others do not know where to turn to find a suitable person to engage with spiritual direction while some others cite money as a reason not to proceed further.

Survey Results

Gen Y’s understanding of the term Spiritual Direction

All respondents could define spiritual direction in a similar way to the definition provided earlier in this paper. However, one respondent gave the response

‘In all honesty – initially I didn’t understand what spiritual direction was. It was only since going to one that I now understand its purposes and aims. Now when I talk to my friends I need to follow it with an explanation. I explain that a spiritual director helps you explore more deeply what you think God is doing in your life in a safe, non-judgemental way (as opposed to direct direction). It also helps you explore questions or niggles in your faith journey to see the deeper work God is doing in and around you’.

Another respondent said, ‘the director uses questioning and curiosity to help draw out the directee, and to hold a mirror up to them and enable them to reflect back on where they are growing as a person, and where God’s activity may be leading them.’

It was interesting that under further comments one respondent made these telling points – ‘I’m not sure if Christian churches in general know much about spiritual direction. I wonder if more churches embraced spiritual direction we would see a shift in deepening relationships with God, less volunteer burn out and churches being better able to serve their communities around them’.

I did speak to a Pastor in a major denomination who had been allocated a spiritual director, but the person simply gave advice from his own experience, and this put the young pastor off what he thought at the time was spiritual direction.

If we are to encourage more Gen Y people into spiritual direction, we need to clearly articulate and accurately define spiritual direction to the would-be directee.

How did Gen Y find out about Spiritual Direction?

Most found out by word and mouth and their nuclear or wider family encouraged them to consider spiritual direction. In one case the respondent was given a choice between engaging with supervision or spiritual direction as they were working for a church. I wonder if they should have had the opportunity to be involved with both support structures rather than be forced to choose.

Reasons for participating in spiritual direction

The reasons included 'a desire to be intentional about my spiritual journey/growth, and wanting to have someone to journey alongside outside of the formal institution of church'. Another respondent stated 'that the church did not nurture my spiritual wellbeing'. This respondent cited 'a lack of mentorship and spiritual support in the Church'.

Another stated that 'they agreed with the concept of meeting with someone to enhance my relationship with God and journey with me as I develop it further.'

Other catalysts for participating in spiritual direction were encountering setbacks, disappointments and particularly challenging times in life and particularly in the area of work. Another respondent stated that initially it acted 'as accountability in keeping up spiritual practices and exploring the fruit of them' but evolved into 'a space for exploring God's calling, my relationships with others and myself through a lens of listening more closely to the Holy Spirit's leading'.

Another theme was to help to maintain a balance in their lives and most talked of the desire to relate to God in the everyday events of their life.

One respondent regarded spiritual direction as a form of self-care and looking after 'my spiritual health'. The person went on to say that it was a good place to reflect on hard questions I have of Christianity.

These responses are real examples of what the literature was saying regarding the needs of GenY people particularly in the spiritual realm.

Experience of Spiritual Direction

Most were very positive. Many found spiritual direction to be clarifying, consoling and freeing. By coming to spiritual direction, the Directee is willing to be vulnerable and has

the opportunity in a non-judgemental environment to be honest with themselves, God and the spiritual director. Many directees valued 'seeing the spiritual in the everyday'.

Not everyone who responded was positive. No-one disliked the concept of spiritual direction. Either it was the wrong time or the wrong person. However, these people saw the value of spiritual direction but as introverts needed time to process movements in their relationship with God.

One respondent stated that 'I have learnt that God's forgiveness is deep and the importance of letting things go'. Another stated 'it has helped me to start seeing myself through His eyes and to be more kind and gracious to myself'. Another described their director as 'a comfortable person to unpack my burdens to'. One directee stated that spiritual direction has helped to bring God's love and grace into my life and thoughts.

One respondent stated that she was at a point of wanting to walk away from Christianity and organised church. However, meeting with a spiritual director has helped this person to keep hold of a relationship with God and given this person hope that she will return to church one day.

In some cases the availability of a suitable director proved challenging. The directors that were approached were already full and it required some resilience on behalf of the directee to find a spiritual director they connected to.

All respondents believed that spiritual direction had strengthened their journey with God. They have valued that they are not alone on their spiritual journey and appreciated the spiritual director reflecting back their own insights. One person described spiritual direction as 'walking with God is a journey with different seasons'.

What are ways that would help more Generation Y people know about 'spiritual direction' and the value of having a 'spiritual director'?

The most common reply was 'word of mouth,' but many made the point that they need to explain accurately what 'spiritual direction' is. Also, if they are recommending it to someone, they need to be able to direct the person to appropriate spiritual directors. Some admitted that they would be struggling to suggest other directors beyond their own one. This is where the ACSD website search option is so valuable:

<https://acsd.org.nz/spiritual-directors>.

Another aspect of spiritual direction that respondents believe should be highlighted is that it is a self-directed process and this is likely to help people trust the space – you get out what you put in, but it is a space where you are cared for and gently led.

A respondent mentioned that it would be beneficial for people who have lots of followers on social media to talk about spiritual direction.

Summary

Although my sample space of ten directees was relatively small, the Gen Y respondents were pleased with their experience of spiritual direction, particularly in relation to the positive spiritual growth that ensued. It is worth noting that in this survey the people surveyed had twelve different spiritual directors.

The survey confirmed that Spiritual Direction is needed for this generation as a significant number felt the Church was not fulfilling their needs. This reinforces the literature findings.

If spiritual direction is so worthwhile to Generation Y people, there is a challenge to all associated with spiritual direction to get the message out in an accurate manner to people who desperately need this support. It is good that there are encouraging numbers training to be spiritual directors through Spiritual Growth Ministries. The training programme is rigorous and valuable. However, we need to avoid the potential problem that there are not enough spiritual directors who match the needs of Gen Y available to meet the need. Also, is there a divide in the way that Spiritual Growth Ministries and some within leadership positions in the Church, both locally and nationally, see spiritual direction?

A hakatauki - ma te ngakau aroha koe e arahi

Let a loving heart guide your decisions.

Sums up spiritual direction.

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