

Spiritual Direction for Ministry in Secular Employment

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"Our position requires that we act with authority; our faith requires that we live in submission. ... Our already healthy propensity for pride is goaded a dozen times a day with no one in sight to check it. It is not merely nice for pastors to have a spiritual director; it is indispensable." ¹

Spiritual direction takes place when two people agree to meet to give their full attention to what God is doing in one of their lives, and seek to respond in faith. According to Peterson, spiritual direction sessions are based in the belief that God is always doing something; an active grace is shaping this life into a mature salvation. Responding to God is not sheer guesswork: the Christian community has acquired wisdom through the centuries that provides guidance. Each soul is unique: to apply that wisdom it is necessary to discern the particulars of this life, this situation. ²

Kenneth Leech describes the traditions of spiritual direction and its significance for the prayer life of the individual. Yet Leech makes no attempt to relate spiritual direction to life in the secular world, rather the reverse –

"... the work of spiritual direction has brought us to the point of crisis, or conflict with the world organized apart from God ..." ³

It is clear that such a programme needs to be re-interpreted if it is to relate spiritual direction to a life spent largely in the secular world, and resolve its conflict with a world that denies the holy. Bi-vocational ministry is a situation where prayer itself, in so many ways the antithesis of activity, has to form an integral part of ordinary existence. The *prêtres-ouvriers* themselves needed to communicate with God in the midst of assembly-line toil. In so doing found that their employment and its orientations nourished their interior life. ⁴

The common one-on-one format for spiritual direction does stand in some danger of reinforcing the self-absorption to which an isolated MSE is naturally subject. Awareness of the problem is probably its own corrective. And insights from the group encounters of the American programme *Education For Ministry*⁵ might provide a fruitful model in which the spirituality of MSEs could be nurtured.

Identity and Identities: what of the fellow-traveller ?

Preserving spiritual integrity, or identity, is a constant challenge to the MSE and to any who would offer them spiritual support. If we follow Nash, there are several dichotomies to deal with. In her interviews she observed three spiritual strategies for dealing with them: generalising, justifying and seeking. If faith and economic thinking are too close, Nash says, then they will collapse into a secular, wholly rationalised mindset. If they are too distant — as in a completely privatised faith — faith concerns will no longer impact on the economic world.

If we want to give expression to a profound connection between faith and economic activity, we are in a delicate position. Trying to maintain a traditional biblical worldview while participating in the modern culture of the corporation — neither constructing an invisible wall between these two, nor suggesting that they are wholly complementary ... is not easy.⁶

The seeker, then, must attempt to reconcile these two worlds and make them relevant to each other by using the tension between business and faith to create a combination of economic and spiritual activity. The trick, Nash concludes, is to maintain some distance — but not too much distance — between the opposing forces of faith and business. Conventional approaches to seeking a spirituality can induce considerable ambivalence in the MSE as for other Christians in secular employment.

Accountability to God and the spiritual values of justice, the common good, sustainability and the wholeness of community may be in conflict with the accountability to the corporate institution or the workplace. That conflict has to be understood and should invigorate a spirituality of the community at work. While traditional spirituality may separate itself from the ordinary working world, a spirituality at/for work must be sought which affirms the working environment as part of God's world.⁷

Dualities abound. Duquoc writes of a dichotomy of inwardness and outwardness — we are entering an era in which the ecclesial monopoly has disappeared and each individual, so it would seem, can live the inward and social dimension of faith other than by proxy and without fear of schizophrenia.⁸

Another duality MSEs must deal with is science vs. religion, relevant because science underpins business' secular orthodoxy. Christians who are trying to reconcile science and religion often ascribe different functions to the two fields, for example, turning to science to answer the 'how?' questions, while religion responds to the 'why?'. In the secular world, evolution has replaced creationism, and the MSE may need to wrestle like Teilhard de Chardin⁹ with the idea of an evolving God, while sustaining their mystical faith. And because the church usually affirms the parish as the context for ministry, taking little account of employment-focused ministry, another tension exists for most MSEs. As almost all have a valued parish base, MSEs try to hold the world of the parish and the world of the workplace together as one so that the experience of employment may become an experience of ministry. It's an ongoing task, made more desperate by the incomprehension each of these worlds exhibits for the other.

Pitt¹⁰ emphasises that the minister in secular employment needs to be secure enough in God simply to wait for God to disclose God's purposes in the situation. This he calls 'secular contemplation in the secular desert'. It is a fascinating image, for it paints the MSE as a pilgrim in a barren land — the secular employment is to be endured, not celebrated. According to Pitt, the spiritual disciplines appropriate to the MSE's employment situation are: not to be constantly talking about God or sharing Christian things, not to be anxious about being successful, not to have unrealistic goals about making converts — they are disciplines of self-control.

The quest for spiritual identity is for MSEs likely to be a continuous and enduring activity. Those people who accept the challenge of their spiritual direction need to be more than well-intentioned: they need to be well-informed and above all, robust.

Motivation and Motivations: what of Call?

While one may hope that the discernment process brings to light the motivations that lead individuals to the calling of minister in secular employment, little attention has been paid to factors that might be found in common among MSEs as group. The following is a partial inventory, probably incomplete and in any case some of the items in the list are incompatible with each other:

- hope of escape from a meaningless secular job into a fulfilling church role
- hope of using the riches of the secular workplace to relieve the barrenness of church life
- hope of using the riches of church life to relieve the barrenness of the secular workplace
- desire to follow a particular exemplar of the MSE ideal
- belief in the godliness of both secular and the sacred vocations, and a dream of uniting them
- admiration for the vicar model of ministry and a desire to minister as much like that as possible
- disgust with the vicar model of ministry and a desire to minister as differently as possible
- vision of a perfected model of lay ministry
- frustration with the limitations of lay ministry

MSEs need to consider which of those motivations lie close to the spiritual heart of their calling, take hold of them and own them. They are the motivations that will energise their spiritual life and give their ministry its character. Those same ones will also enliven their spirituality and their experiences in spiritual direction.

Values: clashes - integrity

It has been repeatedly affirmed that a thirst for spirituality can be detected in the very midst of secularity. Pitt (above) may be reading the situation more pessimistically than is warranted, for McLaughlin, a secular writer, asserts¹¹ that business is far from being a spiritual desert. It is her observation that people at all levels in corporate hierarchies increasingly want to nourish their spirituality and bring more meaning and purpose into their employment life. Spiritual values that are widely embraced in business include integrity, honesty, accountability, quality, cooperation, service, intuition, trustworthiness, respect, justice, and service. And, she says, they want their spirituality to be practical and applied — to bring heaven down to earth.

Niebuhr would agree, and would have us respect that spirituality: “Modern secularism was forced to resist a profanisation of the holiness of God both in the realm of the truth and in the realm of the good, in both culture and ethics ... No Christian theology, worthy of the name, can therefore be without gratitude to the forces of modern secularism insofar as their passion for truth was a passion for God.”¹²

To bridge the gaps between two worlds, two cultures, is no small challenge, for, as the participants in a Lichfield training course recorded these impressions —

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| At work I am called upon to be innovative, creative and participative. | At church, by contrast, I am expected to be passive, conforming and controlled. |
| At work I am required to identify my strengths and seek recognition. | At church I am expected to confess my weakness and claim forgiveness. |
| At work there is often conflict, if not always of the aggressive kind, and this is acknowledged in various ways. | At church, conflict is denied or suppressed. |
| Work demands intense periods of intellectual and/or physical activity. | Church places emphasis on being rather than doing, on silence, contemplation and reflection. |
| Work puts a high value on logical thought convincingly articulated. | The spiritual life has a point at which logic must cease and words are shown for the dangerous things they are. |
| Work demands performance measures and is concerned with outcomes. | Church puts emphasis on doing one’s best and leaving the outcome to God. |

The Lichfield group went on to delineate the culture gap between the two worlds and to specify the challenge. They concluded that ‘the culture of church and the culture of working life are so different as to create a barrier which few are motivated to remove.’¹³ Few perhaps, but finding ways to break through the barrier — for themselves and for others — the MSE is called to this specific challenge and opportunity.

The calling to ministry in secular employment is the call, not to build a bridge between these conflicting elements, but to *be* that bridge. For oneself, in finding a spirituality that will energise one’s ministry; for others, to demonstrate to fellow Christians — in the only way that ultimately matters — that faith-at-work *works*.

Recollection: how to centre oneself with God other than in a religious place

MSEs are called to do their religion wherever they find themselves. To exercise their spirituality in places designed for that purpose, is an opportunity rarely accorded to them. The question that faces them daily therefore is: how to access one’s spirituality while in the secular setting?

The search in secular spirituality for ways to understand faith to be present in real life and not to be merely an intellectual structure is not reductionism but points to new ways of religious experience, an expansion of faith, deepening it. The worker-priests and industrial chaplains witnessed to their experiences of being close to God in the activity in the world of work cooperating with workers and combating oppression. Some worker-priests said they felt more close to God in such types of activity than in church.¹⁴

The nub of the matter is that the MSE will truly be a person in secular employment, one who —

"... will identify with the work people, experience the same contention, take part of the blame, carry the anxieties, be among those needing forgiveness, and release him/herself with compassion as well as the institution, organisation or system."¹⁵

There is the rub. Conventional approaches to the quest for spirituality can prove too simplistic for MSEs as for other Christians in employment. Accountability to God should invigorate a spirituality of one's business community. While traditional spirituality may separate itself from the world of employment, the MSE must find a spirituality that not only takes account of non-Christian spiritualities but also affirms the working environment as part of God's creation. Access to well-judged spiritual direction will be the MSE's greatest single support on that pilgrimage.

¹ Peterson, Eugene H: *Working the Angles - the shape of pastoral integrity* (Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans 1998) p 167

² Peterson, op. cit. p 150

³ Leech, Kenneth: *Soul Friend - an invitation to spiritual direction* (San Francisco, HarperCollins, 1992), p 193

⁴ Arnal, Oscar L: *Priests in Working-Class Blue- the history of the worker-priests (1943-1954)* (NY, Paulist Press, 1986)

⁵ University of the South School of Theology: *Education for Ministry* (Sewanee, Tennessee)

⁶ Nash, Laura: *Believers in Business* (Nashville, TN, Thomas Nelson, 1994)

⁷ Johnson, Dorrie: "Ordained Ministers in Secular Employment", *Theology* vol 101 no 799 (Jan/Feb 1998) p. 26

⁸ Duquoc, Christian (trans John Griffiths): "Spirituality: A Private or a Public Phenomenon?", in *Concilium*, vol 9 no 7 (London, Burns & Oates, 1971) p.28

⁹ Teilhard de Chardin, Pierre: *L'Avenir de l'Homme* (Paris, éditions du Seuil, 1957)

¹⁰ Pitt, Trevor: "Spirituality and the minister in secular employment", in Francis, James M.M. & Francis, Leslie J (eds): *Tentmaking: perspectives on self-supporting ministry* (Leominster, Herts, 1998) pp 296-8

¹¹ McLaughlin, Corinne: "Spirituality at Work", *The Bridging Tree Summer*, Vol 1 Iss 2 (Lifebridge, New York, 1998)

¹² Brown, R.M (ed): *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr* (New Haven, Yale, 1986) pp 88-89

¹³ Diocese of Lichfield, Local Ministry Training Course: *Christians and the Economic Order* (4ed) (Lichfield 1998) pp 10-11

¹⁴ Erlander, Lillemor: *Faith in the World of Work* (Univ. of Uppsala, Stockholm, 1991) pp 169-172

¹⁵ Johnson, op. cit. p 24