

# Using technologies in spiritual direction

Daniel P. Schrock

**T**his article considers how various technologies shape the church's ministry of spiritual direction, a ministry that arguably goes back to Jesus himself. While most directors and directees have preferred to work through face-to-face meetings, they have also used technologies to continue the direction relationship even when the two parties are separated by great distances. After summarizing the preferred mode of in-person direction, I will consider three technologies for spiritual direction in the historical order in which they appeared: letter writing, phone calls, and

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video calls. Seen in this historical light, video calls are merely the most recent example of ways people have used technology for spiritual direction.

## **In-person direction**

The model for face-to-face, in-person spiritual direction is inspired by Jesus, who employed informal, on-the-fly direction in the course of embodying the coming rule of God. His conversation with Martha and Mary illustrates the discerning spirit directors try to employ (Luke 10:38–42), and his conversation with two disciples on the way to Emmaus depicts

the skill of reframing that directors sometimes use with directees (Luke 24:13–35). Such interactions need no communications technology, because the parties are in close physical proximity.

In the third century, spiritual direction among the desert fathers and mothers retained this face-to-face character. People who wanted direction from these fathers and mothers traveled from their homes into the desert to seek “a word” that might lead to more authenticity in their life with God. This word (which,

according to the stories, was often one or more pithy sentences) was spoken in a context of intimate conversation in an ascetic surrounding.

Directors and directees still prefer in-person direction. They typically meet in a quiet place, free of interruptions, and sit in chairs facing each other. The room might have a candle, a cross, a painting, a sculpture, or other visual reminders of the presence of the triune God. The conversation is intimate and confidential, and it uses no communications technology.

The advantages of in-person direction are significant. The two people not only speak and listen to each other; they also look into each other's eyes, catch the inflections in each other's voice,

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notice the micro-expressions crossing each other's face, and read each other's body language. With proper attentiveness, they can pick up nuances of feeling and desire, hope and discouragement. They may receive hints of the ineffable, detect susurrations of the divine, and hear clues of spiritual possibility. The director can gather more information about the directee than in any other mode of direction.

In-person direction resembles the incarnation of God in Christ which stresses the peculiarities of the particular: God was in this particular person who lived, taught, died, and rose again in first-century Palestine. Since face-to-face contact was the usual mode of his ministry, face-to-face contact has also been the preferred mode of spiritual direction. Using an array of skills and sensibilities, the director attends to how the triune God is incarnate in this unique person's life. In turn, the directee hopes the triune God is incarnate in this particular director. The presence of God in one calls out to the presence of God in the other.

### **Direction by letter and e-mail**

In-person spiritual direction has not always been possible, particularly when directors and directees live too far away for personal visits. Thus arose offering spiritual direction through letters.

Scripture itself offers examples of conducting spiritual guidance by letter. Luke-Acts was written for Theophilus (“lover of God”; Luke 1:1–4, Acts 1:1). Whether Theophilus was a real or imagined Christian, Luke-Acts was written to guide the spiritual formation of its readers. Epistolary letters of the New Testament have a similar purpose: to shape the perceptions, aspirations, and behaviors of readers. Paul’s letter to Philemon is an outstanding example of ingenious spiritual direction about a prickly topic of

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social justice—slavery—that was to bedevil the church for centuries. These letters illustrate spiritual guidance by technologies of the written word, which the church now regards as inspired.

Direction by letter soon became common. In the thirteenth century, the Italian Clare of Assisi wrote letters to her directee, Agnes of Prague; four of these letters still exist.<sup>1</sup> In the fourteenth century, an anonymous English director wrote two treatises for a junior monk; they were called *The Cloud of Unknowing* and *The Book of Privy Counseling*, and their writer’s aim was to guide the junior monk’s spiritual

development.<sup>2</sup> In sixteenth-century Spain, John of the Cross occasionally offered direction by letter.<sup>3</sup> In seventeenth-century France, Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal formed a spiritual friendship lasting nineteen years that was conducted mostly by letter.<sup>4</sup>

Offering direction by e-mail is a modern variant of this long tradition. Rather than using pen and paper, director and directee use computers and the Internet. The salient feature of using letters and e-mail messages is that the two people do not see each other face-to-face. Communication happens through words on the page or screen. One might suppose that this mode of direction is less intimate than in-person direction. Yet certain writers have a remarkable ability to convey warmth and to craft sentences in a way that gently plumbs the work of the Holy Spirit. Such writers can become effective directors. Moreover some directors and directees might find in-person direction hard—perhaps because they cannot think quickly in the moment or because speech in

general is challenging—but would thrive with the more contemplative pace of direction by writing.

A major disadvantage of this mode of direction is that neither party can access the other's facial micro-expressions, vocal inflections, and body language. The amount of information a director receives is greatly diminished. She might miss cues that would be obvious if the two people were sitting together. For good or ill, words become weightier, because they are all the director and directee have. If the words are clear and sensitively crafted, they may become gifts to savor. If they are murky and ill-chosen, they may confuse or wound.

An advantage of direction by written word is that each person can slow down. Slower communication creates possibilities for greater reflection and contemplative awareness of God's movements. In our fast-paced culture, slowing down enhances the possibility that direction will get to the heart of the matter. In letters and e-mail messages, one can linger over the words, rereading them, letting them sink into one's soul, and listening beyond them to the Holy Spirit's prompts. This is, of course, precisely what scripture itself allows.

### Phone calls

The telephone offers another technology for spiritual direction.

Directors and directees may meet by phone, whether the call uses

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landlines, cell towers, or Internet packet processing. A director who chooses to receive supervision from another director may also use the phone as the technology of choice. Telephone technology allows two people who live thousands of miles apart to meet inexpensively.

Direction and supervision by phone requires its own rhythm. The parties quickly discover how easy it is to interrupt each other inadvertently. With faces hidden, it can be hard to tell when the other person has finished speaking. A related difficulty is that

interpreting the meaning of silence is harder, because there are no visual clues to signal what is stirring in the other person. Is the

other person taking notes and simply needing more time to finish? Weighing what to say next? Struggling with some emotion? On the edge of a deeper awareness that needs silence to mature? Discerning what is happening in the silence is more difficult over the phone, though not impossible.

As long as director and directee refrain from surreptitiously engaging in multitasking behaviors, direction by phone can boost the concentration of both parties, sometimes even beyond that of in-person direction. One focuses on the sounds and meanings of the words, because one has nothing else. There are no facial expressions, no messages from the other's body. With a narrower field of communicated information, the two parties can heighten their focus on what remains.

Phone calls also allow participants to move. Director and directee can walk around the room during sessions. Pacing the floor and changing postures engage the body in a way that is not possible when director and directee sit for a whole hour, and in the context of the sedentary lifestyle that many North Americans have, movement provides a welcome relief from sitting. If a director or directee happens to be sleepy, walking may sharpen his mind and further focus her concentration.

### **Video calls**

The video call as a mode of direction is vulnerable to technical difficulties. If the technology does not work properly, both parties quickly get frustrated. Beyond the question whether Webcams, microphones, computers, and Internet connections are working properly lies the reality that operator error can halt everything. To illustrate with just one piece of this technological apparatus: either person can foul up a simple thing like the volume setting on the computer's microphone. I've sometimes waited ten or fifteen minutes while a directee struggled to find out why his computer wasn't working properly. It took several attempts and phone calls to solve the problem.

Technical glitches quickly erase any contemplative spirit the parties bring to direction. Even after all problems are resolved, one or both may feel lingering frustration with technology that did not work smoothly. It might take ten or twenty minutes for the emotional noise to ebb away so they can approach the kind of

contemplative listening required for direction to flourish. The director can help shift the focus away from frustrating technical issues by suggesting that they begin the session by praying.

Technical issues aside, direction by video call approximates, but does not match, in-person direction. The two can see each other, face-to-face, though filtered through a screen. Even so, in video calling the body language is less clear. The resolution on the screen may not be detailed enough for detecting facial micro-expressions. Generally only the upper portion of the body is visible. One cannot see the other person's feet and legs. Many of

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us talk with our hands, and often they are not visible on the screen. The personal touch is less pronounced in video calls. The director cannot shake hands with the directee or offer the hospitality of a beverage. The other person's voice and image are disassembled into packets, transmitted through cables, and artificially reconstituted into speakers and onto a screen. Direction is less incarnational.

During video calls an inattentive director can become slightly desensitized to the heartfelt struggles and joys a directee is experiencing, because the technological

apparatus may insert a feeling of distance. Though a director can also become internally distant when the directee is sitting in the same room, the technology of video calls may increase a temptation to let psychological distance creep into the relationship. If one does not attend to it, this distancing can be deadly for effective direction. A self-aware director will seek competent supervision for the internal processes that create this distance.

An advantage of direction by video call is that it can, like writing and phone calls, even out an unequal distribution of directors and people who want direction. In Mennonite Church USA, 75 percent of 131 spiritual directors listed in the denominational directory live in five states: Virginia, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, and Kansas. The remaining thirty-two directors are spread out among sixteen additional states. Mennonites in other states, or in a state where the Mennonite directors are far away, may not have any Mennonite directors within driving distance.<sup>5</sup>

Mennonite Church Canada faces a similar situation. Of seventeen spiritual directors, twelve live in Ontario and five in Manitoba, generally in urban areas.<sup>6</sup> Mennonites who live in other provinces and in rural areas of Ontario and Manitoba may not have Mennonite directors within driving distance. Video calling therefore makes it possible for people anywhere in these countries to receive spiritual direction from a Mennonite director anywhere else in the country, provided both have the right technology.

Video calls further allow directors and directees from differing geographies and cultural contexts to work together. Students of Christian spirituality have long recognized that the geography in which people live shapes their spiritual outlook and expression.<sup>7</sup> Suppose a director from Kansas meets via video calls with a directee in New York City. These two people are embedded in markedly different geographies and cultural contexts. At first the differences might complicate communication and make it harder to understand subtle differences in assumptions and worldviews arising from their varying social locations. Yet over time such a

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direction relationship can also foster intercultural learning.

A third strength of using video calls for direction is that it can reduce one's use of fossil fuels. For several years I drove two-and-a-half hours each way to receive direction. It took me the better part of a day every month to receive direction, and I burned an unconscionable amount of gas getting there and back. In such a context, choosing direction

by video call becomes an act of creation care.

A fourth strength is that homebound directees can meet with the director of their choice. For people with disabilities that inhibit mobility, direction by video calls can be a gift of God.

## **Conclusion**

Although spiritual direction has most often occurred with both people in the same room, for centuries directors and directees have used other technologies so direction can happen when in-person meetings are difficult or impossible. Video calls are only the most recent form. Each technology—writing, phone, and

video—has certain strengths and weaknesses that thoughtful directors will assess when selecting the best option for the context at hand.

Technologies invariably shape the communication they enable. Writing, phone calls, and video conversations each heighten certain aspects of communication while weakening or eliminating others. Directors and directees will want to continue evaluating how technologies affect their working relationship.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Francis and Clare: The Complete Works*, trans. Regis J. Armstrong and Ignatius C. Brady (New York: Paulist, 1982), 189–206.

<sup>2</sup> *The Cloud of Unknowing and Other Works*, trans. A. C. Spearing (London: Penguin, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, DC: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1991), 735–64.

<sup>4</sup> Wendy M. Wright, *Heart Speaks to Heart: The Salesian Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), 44–50.

<sup>5</sup> Mennonite Church USA Leadership Development, compilers, “Mennonite Spiritual Directors List, February 2015,” [http://mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Feb2015\\_SpiritualDirectorsList.pdf](http://mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Feb2015_SpiritualDirectorsList.pdf). These figures do not include four directors who live in Australia, Indonesia, and Japan.

<sup>6</sup> Mennonite Church Canada Christian Formation, compilers, “Mennonite Spiritual Directors List—Canada, November 2014,” <http://www.commonword.ca/FileDownload/19971/2014-11-MCCCanada-SpiritualDirectorsList.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Examples of this awareness include Kathleen Norris, *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993); and Belden C. Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

## About the author

Daniel P. Schrock is a spiritual director, a sessional faculty member at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary (Elkhart, Indiana), and a pastor at Berkey Avenue Mennonite Fellowship (Goshen, Indiana).