Small Group Leadership as Spiritual Direction
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There are many texts discussing Spiritual Direction in groups and many others discussing small group processes. This publication endeavours to bridge the gap in a slightly different way, emphasising the opportunity to lead small groups by using, "...an ancient art of being with another person in relationship with God." The author, Heather Webb, is a minister, a spiritual director and is also a qualified counsellor and holds a masters in counselling degree from Colorado Christian University.

Having recently completed research on young peoples' spirituality in the United Kingdom, I am acutely aware of the need to create space with young people to better enable relationship with God. Written so that it is easily accessible, this text offers reflections on how using some of the key aspects of spiritual direction can help in this process. The book is separated into four main sections, first reflecting on small groups and spiritual direction separately and then reconnecting them while focusing on leadership. The final section offers three groups, each having a different methodology, and succinctly describes the possible role of spiritual direction in each style of group.

Webb proposes that small group interaction is a fundamental aspect of Christianity. There is a clear appreciation of the significance of being a part of the body of Christ – part of a community – in becoming the people God desires us to be. There is also awareness that small groups, especially those related to the Church, serve a variety of different purposes. She particularly mentions the fact that small groups are used at the centre of the Church to facilitate further exploration of God and also for those at the edge of the Church, perhaps beginning a more explicit search for the place of God in their life. Within this variety of groups many different aspects are required for their successful operation, something Webb considers only very briefly.

It is suggested that, "for a small group to be a truly life-changing place for its participants, there needs to be an intentional focus on spiritual formation." For Webb, spiritual direction has a significant role to play in this task. Some may have both theological and methodological concerns about spiritual direction and
this is taken into account in the second section. One other major area of difficulty is the relationship between spiritual direction and various counselling approaches and Webb also draws attention to this issue.

In the third section Webb begins the task of relating her view that a leadership style in small groups’ spiritual direction can positively impact people in post-modern environments. As with all small groups there are difficult issues to be aware of and while Webb makes note of some these, this section is brief. The final section describes a story-centered group, a text-centered group and a prayer-centered group and relates how each can provide opportunity for growth and can benefit from spiritual direction as a leadership style.

Although not specifically directed towards youth ministry, it is my view that this text is relevant and useful to this discipline but it is difficult to engage this book very critically because while Webb makes most of her points clearly and succinctly, they do suffer from a lack of depth. I do not mean to suggest that the author hasn’t undertaken a high level of critique. Indeed I would say that the form that this text takes offers the opposite option but each section is offered in a fairly undemanding fashion.

Having said that, as I read this book there was one thing that arose to the forefront of my thinking on a number of occasions. Webb makes notes of the difficulties that can arise in relation to gender for both spiritual direction and small groups. Despite this awareness in the text I found the use of he or she, her or him etc. quite confusing. These words appear to be used almost interchangeably and I found this somewhat disconcerting. It also appeared to me that the male was used more often in negative situations and if Webb is trying to create some sense of equality in her use of the he/she, him/her etc. then greater attention should be paid to this....but this could also be sign of some unconscious male insecurity within me!

This is still an easy to read text and I would recommend it for those operating in small groups as leader or participant but, as I said, it doesn’t really provide a great deal of depth to get ones’ teeth into. It is probably more of a beginning than an end; something to encourage further exploration and then action in spiritual direction and small groups. There are many other opportunities to further research small groups or spiritual direction but Webb does a good job of opening the door to this subject.