Resourcing the serious searchers

Annemarie Paulin-Campbell

Introduction

TWO HIGHLY COMMITTED YOUNG CATHOLIC WOMEN in their mid-twenties feel drawn to a radical living out of the values of the gospel, but do not feel attracted to join any of the established religious communities; a young woman in her early thirties is put in touch with a spiritual director by her psychotherapist. She is longing to deepen her prayer life, but feels no desire to be part of the Church. A young man joins the novitiate of a well-established religious congregation but leaves a year later, grateful for the experience, but saying he is searching for a way of living his call which is more engaged with inter-faith. A young Jewish woman approaches a Catholic for spiritual direction but with no intention of conversion. These are among the many young people who are serious searchers in the current generation of 23–35s. They desire to connect with people and resources which will help them in their quest to discover what God is inviting them to. Their experience is in some ways so different from that of those in previous generations, that to mentor them is a ministry that is often painful and personally challenging, but may also be deeply fulfilling. This article seeks to examine the ways in which this group could be better resourced and draws on the experience of ten people between the ages of 23 and 35 who are seriously searching.

Who are the serious seekers?

There have been serious searchers in every generation: those who seek earnestly to make their faith the centre of their lives. The difficulty in resourcing this new group of serious seekers is not that they lack faith or commitment, but that their search is taking them along unfamiliar paths.

The 'generation' on whose needs this article focuses, is a group of people between the ages of 23 and 35 who come from a particular socio-economic reality and whose world-view and approach to spirituality is profoundly affected by their exposure to postmodern philosophy. They have been steeped in a culture of liberal humanism and an awareness of the insights of psychoanalysis. They tend to come from technologically advanced nations, with easy access to education.

Unlike many of their contemporaries in other, non-western societies, they have not chosen to pursue some form of consecrated religious life. As a result they do not have access to that kind of well-laid-out programme of religious formation and resources.

How does postmodernism affect the formation of the serious seekers?

Before engaging in an exploration of the question of resources, it is important to think about the world-view of this group of young people, without which there is little hope of meeting their formation needs. It is in this context that the question of the effect of postmodern philosophy is so important.

Within the multiplicity of understandings of what postmodernism may be, I have found that of Professor Degenaar[1] (Department of Theology at the University of South Africa) most useful. He describes, firstly, disillusionment with structures and the reliance upon them; secondly, a belief in the impossibility of direct access to truth, including ultimate truths, and an awareness of the flawed nature of language as a means of communication; thirdly, the fact that postmodernism is marked by its eclectic nature.

The young adults whom I have targeted as the 'serious seekers' are among the generation most affected by this philosophy. The factors which have contributed to the development of a fluid world-view include access by many more middle-class young people to tertiary education which explicitly teaches the questioning of assumptions, access to international travel and also to a variety of perspectives available instantly via the proliferation of global communications. These young people know that it is far from unusual to change career paths two or even three times. The idea that God could call a person to more than one ministry, and even more than one serious commitment in a lifetime, is one that speaks to the experience of this generation. There exists a growing number of people, and I count myself among them, for whom faith is the priority in their lives, but who do not feel called to make a permanent commitment in a religious congregation. In some countries, 50 per cent of this generation will have lived through the breakdown of their parents' marriages. Mabry says of this group that 'disillusioned with any notion of absolute truth and distrusting anyone who claims to offer it, Xers are the first generation to truly internalise a Postmodern sensibility . . .'[2]

Perry describes this process as a shift into multiplicity/subjectivism and links it to the process and impact of a liberal education and

exposure to cultural pluralism. 'Truth is no longer perceived as absolute and singular, but multiple and infinite.'[3]

This new orthodoxy of cultural pluralism has arisen, partly as a result of serious disillusionment with authority and structure, and partly out of the ascendance of liberal humanism. For this group, tolerance, openness and respect for the beliefs of others are paramount, while intolerance and racism are the greatest evils.

The pain of the gap

One of the biggest stumbling blocks in attempting to resource this particular group is the pain of the gap between their experience and that of their potential mentors. My experience over the last few years as a young lay woman, now working full-time in the area of Ignatian spirituality, has often been the lack of understanding and the subsequent alienation from each other of older committed people and the under-35 serious seekers.

The older generation long to share the richness of their tradition: the ways which nurtured their journey in faith. They seem understandably hurt by the lack of vocations to a way of living the gospel which has enriched both them and the people they have served. It is to them that the serious seekers often turn for help in their spiritual journey. Before they can be of help to these young people, however, the older generation may need to painfully let go of their hopes or expectations that the young adults who come to them will experience God's invitation in the same kind of ways in which they experienced their own.

I attended a recent meeting of sisters of a particular congregation, to which lay people were invited. The sisters were exploring how they might share their charism more widely in view of the fact that they have had no new vocations for a long time. It was exciting to be part of a process of asking together how the spirituality of their founder could be shared more widely with serious seekers of many age groups, including the generation under discussion here. At the same time I was asked several times during the day whether I might not in fact have an unacknowledged call to become a religious. I, and many in my situation, feel called in a different way and need the help and experience of such people to discover and live a new way of radical commitment in faith. It is not an easy place to be. There is much criticism of this generation of serious searchers. We are perceived by many whom we admire and respect as 'wishy-washy', lacking the ability to make a real commitment. It is only in those relationships and

contexts in which our search is taken seriously, and respected as different but no less committed, that we feel able to draw on the rich experience and faith of those in previous generations.

Resourcing the serious seekers

The serious searchers tend to begin asking questions related to faith somewhere in their teens, and often begin their search in the faith tradition in which they have been raised. The 18-to-21 age period appears to be critical. If the serious searcher is suitably encouraged at this point in their development, they may remain associated with mainstream church organizations long enough to need a different kind of resource. Following a period of searching in which they cast the net widely, looking for a framework/mentor to help them in their spiritual search, those in the 23-to-35 age group tend to have established the broad parameters of what they believe, and need help in discerning how to deepen and live out their faith commitment. Few in this group will have married or made any permanent commitments. Unlike previous generations, for whom the late twenties were a time of reappraising commitments made much earlier, these young people spend longer exploring and evaluating life-options.

The serious searchers of this generation look actively for information which will help them. A young person searching is far more likely to encounter numerous works on astrology, reiki, and aurosoma colour healing, than to encounter helpful books about Christian spirituality. Resources on New Age spirituality tend to be readable, well presented, have workshop components, and provide access to further sources of information. They are searcher-friendly. Free newsletters provide details of courses offered in every kind of New Age spiritual path. In Johannesburg, every second week a 'holistic spirituality fair' is held, which is widely advertised in the media. In contrast, the vast majority of young people searching for spiritual resources within Christianity, especially if they are outside formal church structures, are unlikely to have any idea where to begin. Two of the serious searchers interviewed expressed their desire for 'a beginner's guide': an ABC of Christian spirituality that they could have purchased in their local bookshop.

Offer something substantial

As serious seekers deepen their search, they look for resources in the area of prayer. If help in this area is not forthcoming, challenging and substantial, they will look elsewhere for it. Almost all of those who were my contemporaries in the Catholic student movement in the late

eighties and early nineties in South Africa have left Catholicism and found what they were asking for in Buddhism or the New Age Movement. Had they been offered a more intensive, in-depth experience of the richness of Christian spirituality, I believe they might not have felt the need to look elsewhere. Some are highly involved, spending up to three hours a day in meditation. Others, with strongly developed social consciences, join organizations such as Greenpeace, or use their skills working for the economically disadvantaged.

There appears to be an unspoken perception among those who try to resource young adults that if too much is asked of them in time and commitment, they will not come at all. Instead of offering eight-day directed retreats, one-day quiet days are offered. I think that this perception is inaccurate. When asked the open-ended question of what kind of resources they would welcome, those searchers whom I interviewed expressed the desire for opportunities for intensive spiritual formation. Three expressed interest in a thirty-day retreat, though not necessarily the Spiritual Exercises. When asked if they had experienced these opportunities, most said they had not because they were unsure how to access them. These young people tend to be open and generous. Their commitment, capacity and desire to deepen their faith-life is often underestimated.

A case study of an effective resourcing experience

Five years ago, a Jesuit priest, working as a student chaplain to university students in South Africa, invited several young people in their early to mid-twenties to come together for a week during the holidays, to talk about their hopes, dreams and aspirations. Those invited were all young people who had individually discussed with him the possibility of making a serious commitment to Christ, but who had not yet found a way of living out this call. They did not feel drawn to marriage, nor did they feel called to any of the religious communities they had considered. In the end only two (of which I was one) were able to come. The two of us, together with the Jesuit who had invited us, spent long hours each day talking freely about the kind of spiritual commitment we felt called to and the needs we perceived in our time. This was not a vocations workshop in the traditional sense. We were open-endedly exploring what it was that we felt God might be calling us to, daring to imagine new things. We were equals in the discussion, our Jesuit mentor only gently reflecting back now and again what we seemed to be saying. Out of the experience of that week emerged a committed lay community, later joined by others, including a woman in

her late fifties. Five years on, the community do not live together, but travel across the city daily to pray together. Its members have sought out formation in the areas of theology and spirituality. They support each other through communal reflection and discernment, and are engaged in a variety of ministries, both within the Church and outside of it. They are not formally recognized by the Church and do not take the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, although they share their possessions. The community is open to men and women, and to those who are serious searchers in any of the Levant faiths.

The experience of this community is not an isolated one. Mabry, in an article about responding to the needs of what he terms 'Generation Xers', talks about the emergence and importance of what he calls 'wisdom circles'. He writes,

> in a wisdom circle, Xers (and those of other generations who wish to join them) meet as equals and companion one another. Activities in such circles usually include some combination of discussion, prayer and ritual. In each of these communities, though intimacy was high, numbers remained small and association sometimes brief.[4]

The role of the mentor was important in the establishment of the community. As the community prayed together each day and began a process of communal discernment, we needed someone with whom we could sound out the new ways that developed of praying and using ritual, and the charism that was emerging. We needed someone who took this process as seriously as we did, but who would be open and non-judgemental as we tried out different ways of praying and being: a containing, encouraging presence who recognized that it was our process and who encouraged us to persevere. Out of the community came various dimensions – new rituals, ways of praying, forms of ministry, and the desire for formation.

When talking with the community members about what kind of resourcing had been important, we agreed on the following aspects:

The mentor/spiritual director:

- a connected person who was searching in similar ways;
- encouraged a peer process;
- was available when the searchers wanted to talk about what was happening;
- was facilitative, non-dogmatic, and imaginative;

- showed trust in God by being available, but not intrusive or directive, and did not offer unsolicited advice;
- was open to learning from the experience of those searching, which enabled them to feel open to drawing on the valuable experience of the mentor;
- was committed to helping them find their authentic response to God's invitation, while recognizing that it may be different from the authentic responses of previous generations;
- believed in the seriousness of the process: that this search was not a second-best or compromise, but something new which we are being called to discover.

This generation of serious searchers, who tend to experience themselves as marginalized from the Church – though they may remain involved and committed – seek out mentors who create spaces for that search and who are not frightened by the fact that it may lead into unknown territories. In order for that to be possible, they must be people who are securely rooted in their own spiritual journey and who will not feel threatened by the explorations of young people who may use ritual, liturgy and new forms of prayer in ways which are not always entirely orthodox. Mabry comments that

> elders who want to support Xers on their spiritual paths would do well to provide space and encouragement for Xers to 'do church' in their own way, including (and especially) writing and performing their own rituals and liturgies.[5]

As communities develop, the role of those who wish to be a resource to them changes. My own experience with the community I belong to is that, as it has taken shape and as we have individually grown through our formation, it has become critical for the resource person to increasingly respect that experience and to engage with us as a fellow-journeyer (albeit on a different journey), rather than as facilitator and mentor.

Peers as resource

The importance of the peer group as a resource, as the entré to other spiritual resources for this generation, cannot be overemphasized. Those young people whom I interviewed spoke without exception of a friend or a group of friends who had helped them to connect with important spiritual resources, for example by suggesting a spiritual

director or a group, such as Christian Life Communities, whom they themselves had found helpful. In the absence of an effective method of connecting with serious searchers who need resources, peers communicate with others who are asking the questions but who do not know where to look. For example, a young woman in her early twenties was grappling with a difficult decision in her life which she was trying to make through prayer. She was not a churchgoer. One of her university friends, a Jewish woman, who was also involved in the Catholic student chaplaincy, put her in touch with a spiritual director, suggesting to her that she needed some help in the area of prayer and discernment. In a generation who find it difficult to trust authority figures, much initial searching takes place within informal, though often intense, discussion with peers. There is also something of a hothouse effect where a group of young people who are serious searchers and who are grappling with similar questions come together. Creating places where this group of young people can come together to search would be an invaluable resource. In South Africa, a Methodist group have opened a theological café, where so-called 'generation Xers', some of whom are not churchgoers, are invited to get together informally to talk about the questions they are grappling with in their search for God.

Temporary/short-term commitments

Among many of the new communities which are emerging, there is a recognition that the commitment may be for a limited time. This may be the outcome of a generation whose life experience has taught them that their most honest response is that they cannot know where God will call them for the rest of their lives, but only where God seems to be calling them now and in the foreseeable future. In the community to which I have belonged for the past five years, we still make a commitment every year for a further year of exploration, and there is the knowledge and acceptance that for some of us it will be a lifetime commitment, and for others a call for a particular period in their lives, after which they may respond to a new call.

A desire which is often expressed among this generation of serious searchers is for the opportunity to live and work with a religious community for a limited period of one to five years. In some places this is becoming a reality, as certain religious communities open themselves more to lay associates, but I am aware of no such opportunities in South Africa at present. Not only would it provide the opportunity for searchers to be immersed in a particular spirituality, which might be a

useful framework for them, but congregations could also be enriched by the different perspectives the searchers might bring.

Spiritual direction for the postmodern generation

This generation of serious searchers seem to place a high value on spiritual direction, once they have discovered such an opportunity exists. They often have a sense of needing a space in which to reflect with another on their relationship with God. Once a personal connection has been established, they tend to seize upon the suggestion of a formalized space with a sense of having found what they did not realize they were looking for. As many are struggling with church, and some are completely alienated from it, they will look for someone whom they perceive as non-judgemental. Among those in this 'generation' whom I see for spiritual direction, more than half no longer belong to any church, nor do they at this stage have any desire to do so. Their relationship with God is central in their lives, but they feel alienated partly by what they perceive as injustices within the Church.

In considering spiritual direction for those between 23 and 35, it is important to be aware that there are likely to be developmental shifts within this period which will necessitate different approaches. In her book *Changing life patterns*, Liebert describes three developmentally linked perceptions of the spiritual director.

> To conformist-oriented persons, the spiritual director tends to be perceived as an expert or authority who provides correct answers, or at least better ways of proceeding. Conscientious directees may use a spiritual director as a sounding board as they increasingly find and refine their own identities and make their own choices. Interindividual persons may understand their spiritual directors more as co-pilgrims who walk beside them sharing both the challenges and delights of the spiritual quest.[6]

The 23-to-35 generation of serious seekers who are in a serious relationship of spiritual direction are likely to make the shift from the conformist to the conscientious stage[7] during that period. More than for other generations, perhaps, their life-experience and world-view hasten this shift. Although some will avoid the uncertainties of that shift by becoming more rigidly conformist and looking to the security of old authorities, most grapple with the change. A spiritual director sometimes will accompany a young adult, perhaps from their late teens or early twenties through to their early thirties. If during this period the

directee shifts into the conscientious phase, a qualitatively new director–directee relationship will have to be created if the relationship is to survive and the young person is to continue to develop in their spiritual life. This demands great awareness on the part of the director, who needs to be alert to notice when that shift is beginning to take place. 'When the directee signals from within that the transition has begun – then the director allies himself or herself gently with the newly emergent system of meaning making.'[8] Jean Baker Miller also identifies the need for the person to be resourced in different ways as they develop, if their growth is not to be stunted. She distinguishes between relationships of temporary and permanent inequality, 'the former representing the context of human development, the latter, the context of human oppression', and suggests that in relationships of temporary inequality, such as that of parent and child, or teacher and student, power ideally is used to foster the development that removes the initial disparity.[9] If the necessary shift cannot be made in the relationship between director and directee, the young person may need, painfully, to leave what has been a significant spiritual direction and often mentoring relationship, in search of a different kind of relationship with someone else. It is a challenge to the director to change the nature of the accompaniment offered or to let go and encourage the young person to find it elsewhere.

Conclusion

It is not easy to find ways of resourcing this generation of serious searchers. To minister to them is both exceptionally challenging and highly rewarding. The reason is that it is not about creating structures. Those who mentor must both witness to their own deep commitment to Christ and to the way of life they have chosen, and at the same time be open to helping this generation of serious searchers to discern where God might be calling them. In each context the way it is done will be different, but it is above all a respectful and interested attitude which will enable mentors/spiritual directors to help individuals or small groups to focus and deepen their search. Where that happens, this generation will profoundly value that experience and will in turn use it to help others in the same generation.

Annemarie Paulin-Campbell is a Catholic lay person, aged 28, who belongs to a small inter-faith community called the Epiphany community. She is a qualified educational psychologist. She has been involved in Christian Life Communities and in working with Catholic students in South Africa. After completing an MA in Christian Spirituality at Heythrop College, London, she spent time at St Beuno's retreat centre before returning to South Africa to work with the Jesuits and members of her community as director of an Ignatian spirituality project.

NOTES

1 Lecture notes from Professor Degenaar's keynote address at the UNISA conference, 1995.
2 J. R. Mabry, 'The gnostic generation in presence', *The Journal of Spiritual Directors International* vol 5, no 2 (May 1999), p 37.
3 Perry, quoted in M. F. Belenky, B. McV. Clinchy, N. R. Goldberger and J. M. Tarule (eds), *Women's ways of knowing: the development of self, voice and mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), pp 62–3.
4 Mabry, 'The gnostic generation', p 45.
5 *Ibid.*, p 46.
6 E. Liebert, *Changing life patterns: adult development in spiritual direction* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1992), p 67.
7 For a detailed discussion of the conformist, conscientious and interindividual stages of spiritual development see Liebert, *Changing life patterns.*
8 *Ibid.*, p 72.
9 Jean Baker Miller, quoted in Carol Gilligan, 'In a different voice: visions of maturity' in J. W. Conn (ed), *Women's spirituality*, 2nd edn (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), pp 105–130.

I WASN'T PREPARED FOR MY DAD'S sudden death when I was twenty-four. I battled with grief and was shaken to the core. Amid the despair I was struck by the faith and commitment of the young Cockney priest who buried my Dad. I could relate to his accent although not to his church. I sought him out; he signified hope.

In the 1980s I worked for a charity which provided scholarships for Africans in exile. I met Helao, a Namibian, when he was undertaking an access course in the UK. He was in his early fifties. I was thrown by the sixteen-year gap on his CV. He had been imprisoned for that time on Robben Island, the notorious South African prison, by the apartheid regime. His crime was membership of a liberation movement which sought freedom, peace, justice and equality. He had endured systematic torture but had refused under interrogation to incriminate comrades or his liberation movement. I could barely comprehend his circumstances. It was his seeming absence of hate that I found most disconcerting.

Today the lure of fear, self-pity and resentment is rarely far away. My thoughts lead me away from hope and towards self-destruction. But I don't wish to return there. I struggled with trusting God for years. I was frightened that I was being tricked and that I was about to be overwhelmed and destroyed. It wasn't until I had my back against the wall that I finally surrendered to God. The opposite happened. It was as if I had been imprisoned by my circumstances and someone unlocked the door, took my hand and gently accompanied me out. I have never regretted that moment of surrender.

Mary King