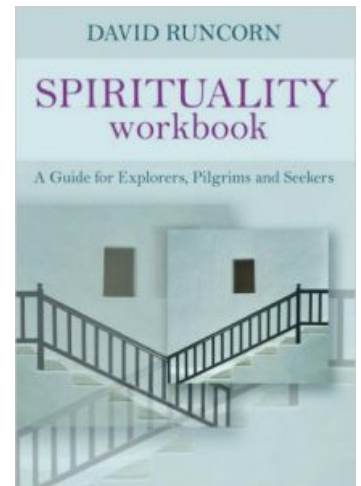


# Review: Spirituality Workbook – A Guide for Explorers, Pilgrims and Seekers

Some books are wide-ranging and broad. Some books are deep and specific. David Runcorn, in *Spirituality Workbook*, deals with some of the nitty gritty of everyday expressions of Christian spirituality, and manages to do both; it is both deep and wide. I read the slightly older 2006 edition.



The breadth comes from the simple amount of material covered. Runcorn has put together work from years of the rhythm of theological formation. The chapters are short and independent from each other, but each is a gem of insight and reflection. The content ranges from topical analyses, to reflections on historical persons and movements, to unpacking specific spiritual disciplines.

It is impossible, therefore, to condense the book down into a governing argument, or to give a fulsome summary. For myself, I take from the book a number of insights that interact with, subvert, and even blatantly combat some of the ways in which Christians and churches have capitulated to the spirit of the age.

Consider his early chapter on the spirituality of the desert, which draws on the example of the early monastics. He identifies the motivation of a “longing for God” that cannot be satisfied in an “increasingly worldly church” (page 10). And his enumeration of the value of the wilderness experience includes concepts such as “judgment” and being “confronted

with the sheer depth of our need of conversion" (page 11) that are anathema to the comfortable pews of the western world which idolise success and fanfare.

*"In the desert you leave behind all your familiar securities. You come to a place of confessing your absolute need and the emptiness of all you have been placing your trust in... The desert is a place that weans us off addictions and false dependencies. If your god is not the true God the desert will find you out. Only the true God can sustain you in the wilderness."* (Page 11)

Consider the irony in his reflection on exile in a changing world, that the word from which we get "parish" and "parochial", *paroikia*, originally meant "a place of refuge or exile" for Christians who experienced themselves as "resident aliens, non-citizens... sojourners in the world... shaped by the experience of enforced mobility, vulnerable exile and disorientating change" (page 23).

Consider the frustration that recognises that "finding and sustaining *community* in today's society is a real struggle" even when "the Christian vision of community is central to spiritual formation, prayer and faithful discipleship" (page 51). Hear the challenging wisdom, quoted from Bonhoeffer:

*If we do not give thanks daily for the Christian community in which we have been placed, even where there is no great experience, no discoverable riches, but much weakness, small faith and difficulty, if we only keep on complaining to God, we hinder God from letting our fellowship grow according to the riches which are there for us all in Jesus Christ."* (Page 55)

Ponder his counter to the addiction of churches to self-actualising mission management, as he values a rule of life that resists that greatest of all Christian predilections: the

inability to say “no” to something that is good but wrong.

*It is quite common for churches to have their own mission statement these days. What is less common is to find churches that have gone on to think and pray through together a shared, sustainable shape of living that might make that vision realizable. Without an agreed boundary to its life and mission, church life proceeds on the assumption that Christian time and energy can extend limitlessly into an ever-increasing range of worthy projects. That this is all “for God” just makes the burden worse! **The result is corporate exhaustion, guilt and frustration.**” (Page 65, emphasis mine)*

He gives important correctives for our corporate life: “Worship that is organized to impress outsiders is no longer true worship – which is offered to God alone” (page 70). He gives insight into culture: “The defining identity on offer today is that of consumer” (page 89). He plumbs the depths of spiritual practices that may have become staid: “Intercession involves seeking to be where Christ already is... [it] is a participation in Christ’s costly and life-giving presence in the world.” (page 122).

And whether it be in the presentation of the Jesus Prayer or a discourse on sexuality, Runcorn takes us deeper, *uncomfortably* deeper, *blessedly* uncomfortably deeper. Here is the constructive *challenge* of an effective spiritual director. Such challenge disabuses us of immature and insipid notions of Jesus and what it means to follow him. It presses us beyond superficiality and the ubiquitous ecclesial shallows and *provokes* us.

Where we would settle for peace & tranquility, he would take us to the *shalom* of Christ, who also challenges, and provokes and questions our assumptions until we rely on him: the Christ who counters our agendas with “Unless you repent you will all

perish” (page 177). Where we would like to waft on clouds of easy ecstasy, he reminds us that “Christian prayer is more often marked by conflict than by feelings of peace” (page 179). Where we would prefer the stagnancy of unrocked boats, we are reminded that true hospitality and receptivity “does not mean becoming neutral” (page 193).

*It is neither polite nor respectful to just sit agreeing with everything your guest says. We are to offer a real articulate presence, sharing our own beliefs, opinions and lifestyle clearly and distinctly. ‘An empty house is not a hospitable house,’ [Nouwen] says, ‘Real receptivity asks for confrontation.’ (Page 193, emphasis mine)*

We have challenge, confrontation, provocation, uneasiness.

This is the stuff of life. What we have then, is a book to return to, and a book to recommend. It takes us to depths that are rare in the salt-pan of contemporary corporate Christianity. It is both comfort and correction, broad and deep, and therefore utterly useful.

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## Mentoring, Spiritual Direction, or Discipleship

One of the most important dynamics in living churches is that of intentional one-on-one relationships that help individuals mature in their faith. We have our Sunday gathered worship times, and our small groups, and prayer triplets and things like that, but intentional personal *investment* is invaluable. Many of us can reflect on the individuals who



have invested in us over the years, be it formally or informally; they are invariably God's gift to us.

These *investing* relationships, however, are not all alike.

There are a number of words and phrases that we use to describe them. The three I want to pick up on here are "discipleship", "mentoring", and "spiritual direction".

Understanding the differences between these is important.

There is a lot of overlap, but the semantics informs the intention of the relationship. And the intention helps guide the expectations of those who are entering into it. It also allows each form of relationship to be valued in its own way.

Here, then, is how I would describe these three forms of investing relationships:

**MENTORING:** This is a broad category and the word has a high semantical overload. It is also the word that most readily overlaps with secular domains.

Broadly speaking, the mentoring relationship is a *reflecting* one. A mentor helps you to analyse and articulate what is already there. In mentoring, goals are clarified, actions are identified, resources are suggested. A mentor is someone to "bounce off", to run ideas past, to seek advice from, and to approach with questions. They willingly allow their experience to be tapped.

The process is driven and shaped by the person being mentored.

The mentor does not direct, and will not even provide accountability unless it is requested. The scope of mentoring can be quite small, focussing on professional life, or a particular issue or obstacle.

**SPIRITUAL DIRECTION:** The key to this form of relationship is in the phrase itself. It is *spiritual* in that it considers life holistically and deeply, and with particular attention to our relationship with God. It explores matters of conscience

and calling, prayerfulness and petition.

It is *direction* in that the relationship is “directive.” This is not in the sense of a manipulation or domination, but in the sense that a doctor can be directive in pursuit of increased health for the patient. The direction is cooperative and always constructive.

The spiritual direction relationship is about *shared discernment*. The spiritual director assists with self-reflection but also speaks truth from a shared source of inspiration such as Scripture. The director can bring spiritual exercises, or directions to explore: forms of prayer, actions of repentance that need to be considered.

**DISCIPLESHIP:** For many “discipleship” is not easily grasped. It is sometimes an empty phrase that is used as a churchified version of “mentoring” or a hipper version of “spiritual direction.” However, the best framework for considering discipleship is “apprenticeship”, in the older sense in which a more experienced person shares *life* and *purpose* with an apprentice, not just vocational skills.

Jesus was a discipler. His disciples travelled with him, ate with him, argued with him, and learned from him. Only rarely did he exclude them from his activities and his time. Discipleship is about *sharing life*.

The relationship is shaped by vulnerability and openness. A way of life, and necessary skills, are passed on through allowing the other to observe and participate in the inner life that is then expressed outwardly. Vocation is not just about skills but about foundational motivations and values, about *what moves and guides and what is done in response*.

Someone who is discipling needs to be willing to open their lives and explain and demonstrate what moves and shapes them. They will find themselves challenged by the relationship, as much as they invest in the other person.

In this way the Christian discipler is not making their own disciples, but disciples of Jesus. They bring another into both the interior and exterior of how they follow Christ, and so bring others into that same “followship” where Jesus is the guide. Paul’s *“imitate me as I imitate Christ”* expresses this dynamic. Good discipleship therefore doesn’t create dependence, it creates *community at which Christ is the centre*.

Similarly, propagation is *inherent* to discipleship. The sharing of life includes the sharing of the discipling dynamic itself. Discipled people will find themselves discipling others, in their own way. There was wisdom in Jesus’ ways, his discipling ended up founding a movement and changing culture.

I am heartened that the Church of England, and Anglicanism in general, is (re)embracing the language of discipleship. The General Synod report, *Developing Discipleship*, (written by Bp. Steven Croft, soon to be the Bishop of our Diocese of Oxford), approaches it with an understanding of the depths and breadths of what it means. Likewise, when we use the phrase we must realise that it is not about lipservice to a trend, nor even about advancing oneself: discipleship allows us to put all things, together, at Christ’s feet. It is therefore costly, requires courage, challenges our character, and changes church culture. We should not use the word lightly, but we should certainly pursue it.