

IS SPIRITUAL DIRECTION RIGHT FOR YOU?

by Kathleen Fischer

On a sunny spring afternoon, Angela arrived at my office for her first spiritual-direction session. She was a bit nervous, not knowing what to expect, and was frankly a little embarrassed about her prayer life. An oncology nurse for many years, with three adult children and five grandchildren, Angela never felt she had enough time for prayer. At a retreat, she heard others talk about seeing a spiritual director, and it kindled a longing in her for that kind of support. Our initial session went well, and Angela decided to come again. After we had met monthly for more than a year, she reflected: "Spiritual direction is, for me, a place of safety and grace. I feel like it has helped me find fuller life, faith, hope, and love."

Like Angela, you may wonder if you need a spiritual director. To help you decide, let us look at the meaning of spiritual direction, and then consider some guidelines for finding a director.

Recall for a moment how Jesus walked with others. He listened attentively to Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, sensing what was in their hearts and drawing them out with his questions. (See Jn 3:1-21, 4:7-19.) He taught his disciples how to pray and to notice God's presence everywhere. Under Jesus' guidance, they gradually heard the Spirit urging them to forgive enemies or relinquish possessions. Graced by these conversations, they left with a fresh awareness of God's unconditional love, determined to carry it into their communities.

Spiritual direction is a similar conversation between a director and someone who wants to grow in the Christian life. Convinced that the Spirit lives in us, as well as in all creation, the director and directee (the person being directed) attend to God's many manifestations: Where is God in my desire to quit my job, or in my struggle with symptoms of Parkinson's disease? Am I being called to take a more courageous stand on justice issues? What is the meaning of this darkness I encounter in my prayer? "My director is so good at listening deeply, helping me to express what's trying to hide," said one ministry student. "I'm better now at allowing my life to unfold in God's time."

The term *direction* suggests that one person tells another what to believe or how to act, but a spiritual director helps others freely name what God is doing in their lives and shape their own response. To distinguish this kind of companionship from a more authoritarian approach, some prefer the term *spiritual guide* or *soul friend*. A young attorney highlights the difference: "My spiritual guide doesn't operate like the directors of my firm, who always try to impose their own agendas on me. Instead, he helped me recognize how much I want to know Christ, then suggested I try the Jesus Prayer. Now I say it often, and it anchors me when life gets especially hectic."

Although topics like marital conflict, depression, or troubled teenagers may arise during sessions, spiritual direction is not psychological counseling. If a person is depressed or faces other serious personal problems, a spiritual director will usually recommend psychotherapy. However, the person may also continue in regular spiritual direction in order to explore how God's call and compassion are present during these tough times. For example, one woman in counseling stemming from childhood sexual abuse remarked: "Coming for spiritual direction as well as doing therapy this year helped me see that God really wants my wholeness and happiness. I enter into this next phase of healing at peace, though a little scared, knowing of God's love for me."

Spiritual direction is an honored practice whose roots lie deep in the Catholic tradition. Scholars usually trace its beginnings to the fourth-century desert fathers and mothers. In the rugged setting of the Egyptian desert, both new and established Christians sought guidance from those considered more experienced or holy.

Throughout history, noted spiritual companions have offered diverse forms of this ministry, showing us what to look for in a spiritual friend. Teresa of Avila, for example, infused her guidance with common sense and a love of laughter. Jane Frances de Chantal reassured spiritual seekers who felt inadequate, encouraging them simply to redirect their hearts when they found themselves failing often. As practiced today, spiritual direction is especially indebted to Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Society of Jesus. His *Spiritual Exercises* provides not only a detailed description of the director's role (he or she should be both gentle and prudent) but also a comprehensive handbook for spiritual direction.

This ancient Christian ministry has experienced a resurgence in recent decades, its remarkable growth fueled by widespread hunger for prayer and a desire for greater intimacy with God. Though often considered a ministry of ordained clergy or vowed religious, spiritual direction embraces the gifts of the laity as well. In several of its documents, including the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*), the Second Vatican Council affirmed that the vocation to holiness and ministry is universal to all the baptized. (See 33, 40). The council's fruits can be seen in laypeople's serious attention to their spiritual lives, as well as in the growing number of laypeople serving as spiritual directors.

Spiritual direction has been particularly important in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions, but more recently people from diverse religious backgrounds—Protestant, Anglican, Jewish, Quaker—are reviving its practice. Moreover, as the popularity of spiritual direction grows, its outreach includes elders with dementia, prisoners, and the homeless.

Since not everyone is interested in one-on-one spiritual guidance, interest in group spiritual direction is also increasing. In this form of direction, three to five people and a facilitator typically meet monthly to support one another in noticing and responding to God's ongoing presence in their lives. Group members commit

to sharing their own sacred story, listening prayerfully to others, discerning what they hear in the times of silence, and offering that response to each person. Members also promise to pray for one another between meetings.

Spiritual friendship can be both formal and informal. You probably experience the spontaneous kind often, as when you and a friend ponder how best to love a difficult relative. Such informal guidance happens regularly in bible or prayer groups, and in conversations with pastors, family, and friends. But if you desire a relationship with a trained minister who practices spiritual direction in a more formal way, here are some suggestions for finding that person.

Who makes a good spiritual director? Above all, we seek faith and wisdom in such a companion. But other considerations may also matter: Would you be more comfortable with a man or a woman? Why are you looking for spiritual direction at this time, and what do you hope to gain from it? Do you want an ordained minister or vowed religious, or would a married layperson better understand your life situation? How far are you willing to travel to meet with this person?

To find a spiritual director who is right for you, ask friends, parish ministers, or the staff of a local retreat house or school of theology. Most people select a director based on the recommendation of someone they trust, the same way they choose other helping professionals like counselors or doctors. You may also use the resources of Spiritual Directors International. This organization, begun in 1989 by a group of Christian directors, is dedicated to supporting spiritual directors worldwide. Its membership now includes more than five thousand directors representing fifty countries and many cultures and faith traditions. Its Web site (www.sdiworld.org) contains a map listing regional coordinators who can recommend trained spiritual directors in your geographical location.

Interview two or three qualified directors. Ask about their training and experience, how they administer spiritual direction, whether they charge a fee and how it is established, how they handle confidentiality, and any other concerns you have. Notice especially how comfortable you feel with a possible director. The quality of your relationship, especially your level of trust, will be among the most important aspects of your journey, for spiritual direction entails an open and honest sharing of your story.

Expectations regarding fees for spiritual direction differ widely. Some directors consider it a part of their ministry and charge nothing, or they may suggest a donation to the retreat center where they serve. Others rely on their practice for income and regularly charge a fee. Almost all directors are willing to negotiate an individual fee arrangement, however.

During your first session, you and your director will determine the basic structure for your time together, including when and how often to meet. Sessions usually last about an hour and take place once a month, but their length and frequency

depend on circumstances. For instance, some individuals find having a spiritual companion during life's significant moments—retreats, important decisions, major transitions, times of illness or grief—to be enough. Since spiritual direction is a voluntary commitment, a person can stop at any time, and it is also perfectly acceptable to say that the relationship is not working. After a certain number of meetings, you and your director will usually evaluate how things are going, and mutually decide whether or not to continue.

No two spiritual direction encounters look exactly alike, for directors have unique personalities and the people they see bring a variety of experiences. However, certain elements are usually present. A session typically includes prayer, either at the beginning and end or when it arises naturally. Persons seeking direction bring what is in their hearts and on their minds: difficulties or consolations in prayer; pending decisions and significant dreams; stories of struggle or success in living the gospel. The director listens closely, sometimes mirroring back what he or she has heard or asking a question to help clarify a point. He or she may offer a suggestion, a gentle challenge, a Scripture passage, or words of encouragement. As in any conversation, both laughter and tears punctuate the sharing: "My director has been with me in so many seasons of my life—times of great growth and great loss—and all the in-between times," said one long-term directee of her relationship with her director. "I could show her my anger, sorrow, or joy, trusting that I would be treated compassionately and not be judged."

At times of a major decision, such as a possible call to the priesthood or religious life, meetings may focus on the pros and cons of the possible choices and on the divine promptings found in our deepest feelings and desires. Both director and directee will also watch for an abiding sense of rightness or peace about a choice and for the wider Christian community's confirmations of an individual's call. As in every spiritual-direction session, both persons in the dialogue listen attentively for signs of the Spirit, the final touchstone for Christian prayer and action. Paul names these signs in his Letter to the Galatians: "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (5:22-23).

While it is available to anyone who is serious about the spiritual journey, spiritual direction is not required for growth in one's faith. Moreover, it does not appeal to everyone. Support for a vibrant faith comes from many sources: the Eucharist and other sacraments, personal and communal prayer, spiritual reading, and retreats.

From the earliest centuries, however, countless Christians have also searched out seasoned guides. Whether or not we choose it for ourselves, the ongoing popularity of spiritual direction testifies to a perennial truth about the pilgrimage of faith: We need the love, wisdom, and witness of other travelers. The fundamental role of community in an individual's spiritual life was a persistent theme of Catherine of Siena, one of history's most esteemed spiritual directors. As she emphasized repeatedly, although each of us has our own vineyard, every one of us must also be joined to our neighbors.