

An introduction to the ministry of spiritual direction – Anne Shave

“What is spiritual growth and how do I foster it in my life?”¹ When we find ourselves asking this question we may appreciate being able to discuss it with someone else. We might do so in small groups, among friends, or with someone else in our parish. We may not be aware that within the Church there is a long-standing tradition of support offered to those who would like to converse with another person about the spiritual life. This article is an introduction to the ministry of spiritual direction. William Barry and William Connolly define spiritual direction as “help given by one Christian to another which enables that person to pay attention to God’s personal communication to him or her, to respond to this personally communicating God, to grow in intimacy with God, and to live out the consequences of the relationship.”² Trained spiritual directors and attendees (people who engage in spiritual direction) told me what spiritual direction means to them. Pseudonyms are used to protect the anonymity of interviewees.

Spiritual directors usually meet with individuals on a regular basis, often over a period of months or even years. At each appointment, lasting about one hour, the director asks open-ended questions to encourage attendees to reflect prayerfully on their lives and faith. As one spiritual director, Brian, explained, time and space is provided for attendees to “sift through what’s happening for them inside.” He added: “What the director is helping them do is to notice, as they look back over their daily lives, notice the moments where there is an experience of God or an experience of mystery breaking into their lives.” Richard, who attended spiritual direction regularly for several years, told me that a “very basic question” of spiritual direction was: “Where is God in this stuff that’s happening here?” Richard felt “that’s a very good question.” He described his time at spiritual direction, and his reflection afterwards, as really helpful, because “it’s hard to see God at times”.

Practice of Listening

Susan Phillips, a sociologist and spiritual director writes: “Talking to another who takes an interest in our spiritual experience allows us to narrate our lives, weaving coherence and meaning as we do.”³ As Presbyterian minister and retreat director Andrew Dunn observes: “There is a shortage of listening in life today, whether between spouses, parents and children or in life in general, and not least in the church.”⁴ Spiritual director Louisa agreed it can be an “utter relief” for some individuals – perhaps especially for those in helping professions or in familial situations that demand constant care of others – to be able to talk to someone who will listen attentively to them for an hour.

Reflecting on her experience of spiritual direction, Raewyn, a mother with three children, said: “To have someone just to give their time up to listen to me is just amazing.” Linda, who works in a parish, explained that one difference between spiritual direction and conversations she has with close friends is that she need not be concerned about providing space for them to talk, or, as she put it, needing to be “a little bit more discerning and not coming in with your own story. In spiritual direction you’ve got the floor!”

¹ Kathleen Fischer, *Women at the Well: Feminist Perspectives on Spiritual Direction* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1988), 3.

² William Barry and William Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*. Revised and Updated. 2nd ed. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2009), 8.

³ Susan S. Phillips, *Candlelight: Illuminating the Art of Spiritual Direction* (Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 2008), 171.

⁴ Andrew Dunn, “Spiritual Direction,” *Candour: News and Views for All Ministers*, Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand, Issue 1, February 2011, 17.

Exploring and Discovering

Many people who attend spiritual direction do so initially because they sense that there may be more to the spiritual life than they are currently experiencing. They “want to go deeper into God” and “grow in their relationship and understanding,” said spiritual director Carol. Others may feel that they have reached a “stuck place” in their faith, when spiritual practices which had formerly provided nurture and nourishment no longer seem to be so helpful. Spiritual direction may be of particular value for those who find themselves at what Sandra Schneiders calls these “growing points”⁵ in the spiritual journey.

There are vast resources of prayer within the Church for people to discover. Spiritual directors may be able to point individuals towards forms of prayer that could be helpful to them, or introduce them to spiritual frameworks, such as Ignatian spirituality, that encompass “long-tested wisdom,” as spiritual director Matthew pointed out. Tony explained that spiritual direction provides space for tentative exploration. He told me that he sometimes suggests to directees: “Why don’t you go away and try that, and let’s talk about it next time?” Liz, an Anglican priest, also considered spiritual direction to be a context within which “a lot of people” can have “great fun exploring things. And I am too.” Exploring unfamiliar spiritual practices can be life-giving for people who have been journeying in faith for some time.

Making Sense of Life

In the context of spiritual direction people may also find a safe and accepting place to talk about some of the paradoxes and hard questions of faith. Matthew observed: “Not all of life is the same, and the spiritual journey is not some smooth path, not some smooth upward incline and you just get holier and holier. There are times when you feel like the wheels have fallen off. And it’s OK. This has happened to God’s people ever since the beginning.” When difficult life events occur – such as relationship breakdowns, redundancy, illness or bereavement – some of our beliefs may be thrown into question. Some of us may find it difficult to talk with others about such things, and opportunities to discuss deep questions about life and faith with our minister or priest may be limited. Tony said that at spiritual direction people “can say whatever they need to say, and be really honest, and know it’s held and it’s confidential and someone else cares.”

Susan Philips writes that spiritual directors can also “extend the gift of memory” to people experiencing disequilibrium in their faith. Speaking with someone who recalls “the ups and downs of the path we have walked, and continue to walk”⁶ can be very reassuring. At times of uncertainty or upheaval, a spiritual director can gently remind us that God has been with us in the past, is with us now, and that God’s faithfulness “endures forever” (Ps 117:2).

Spiritual directors

In New Zealand, spiritual direction training is currently offered through an ecumenical programme provided by Spiritual Growth Ministries (SGM), and through programmes grounded in Ignatian spirituality, such as *Te Wairua Mahi*: Forming Spiritual Directors in the Ignatian Tradition. The Association of Christian Spiritual Directors in Aotearoa New Zealand includes members from a range of denominations. Registered members receive ongoing supervision, as well as attending spiritual direction themselves. They agree to a code of ethics.

⁵ Sandra M. Schneiders, “The Contemporary Ministry of Spiritual Direction.” *Chicago Studies* 15 (Spring 1976): 119-35. Reprinted in *Spiritual Direction: Contemporary Readings*, edited by K. G. Culligan, 41-56. New York: Living Flame, 1983.

⁶ Phillips, *Candlelight*, 38.

If spiritual direction interests you:

- Speak to someone you know who attends spiritual direction, and ask them about their experience.
- Look for “Spiritual Direction” or “Spiritual Directors” on diocesan websites, such as <https://chchcatholic.nz/pastoral/spiritual-direction/>
- The website of “The Association of Christian Spiritual Directors in Aotearoa New Zealand” provides a list of spiritual directors, by location – <http://www.acsd.org.nz> - and gives further information about the training and responsibilities of its members.