

Spiritual Direction

A short Introduction by Elizabeth Hopner, Trinity College Chaplain

What Spiritual Direction is...

The relationship of Spiritual Direction is a holding in relationship with God. It is an invitation and empowerment to become aware, identify and clarify the movement of the Spirit and the action of God in the directee's life.

Spiritual Direction is a relationship which is undertaken with great care, on the part of the director and the directee. The primary focus of the relationship between directee and director, is the directee's relationship with God.

Spiritual direction may happen on a one-off occasion, or intermittently, and may have profoundly helpful and deep results. However, this is not seen in the same way as intentional spiritual direction on a regular basis, for instance monthly or two monthly – or more frequently if desirable.

Spiritual direction can include teaching, coaching and pastoral counselling. However, the difference lies in the fact that its primary focus remains the relationship with God.

The aim of the relationship is to help the directee grow to inner freedom to respond to God's call and invitation. God is the primary spiritual director.

Jesus lays in front of us the ultimate model of this way of being in relationship.

Mutual trust and honesty is foundational to this relationship. The effectiveness of the relationship is governed by the honesty of the directee in the sharing of his or her cares and concerns, and stirring of emotions at the deepest level. St Ignacius of Loyola saw all our feelings as an expression of the spiritual life.

The director, through a prayerful life open to the presence of God, listens with great care and will honour whatever is shared. There is sometimes a place in spiritual direction for the director to share with the directee their own experience. In this instance it brings to mind the mutuality of relationship in the Trinity.

On occasion the function of spiritual direction can be described as that of being a midwife (or co-discerner and co-listener), in helping the directee to identify, clarify and articulate the action of God in his or her life, bringing to birth knowledge which is already there, but not yet named.

Listening to mind and body raises awareness of the movement of the Spirit within. The art of direction lies in inviting and empowering the directee to go deeper, until the directee is able to identify and articulate for his or herself the movement of the Holy Spirit.

It is a mentoring relationship touching the deep parts of our being, encouraging and holding the directee accountable to God's invitation and love and grace in his or her life. It is about finding God in the things we tend to ignore, in the things we choose not to think about, because they are too difficult or painful or make us feel uncomfortable. Most importantly spiritual direction is a companionship through the barren, dry desert places of the heart, as well as finding God in times of joy and celebration, and in the ordinary, simple, every-day events of our lives. It is about

those special moments that in the rush and busyness of the current pace of life we easily skip over, or forget. Sometimes the encounter with God is so deep and personal that it is impossible to describe in human language.

In all these things, spiritual direction requires discretion and commitment to being in relationship with God, being accountable to God, and to another human being. It requires humility, deep faith, knowledge and wisdom.

A wide variety of forms of communication can be helpful in the process of spiritual direction. For example, dreams, visual, spoken, written resources, question and invitation, observation, reflective listening, humour, the engagement of mind, body and spirit. Patience, perseverance and ability to look and listen with the eyes and ears of the heart are essential.

Space for silent waiting, space for allowing grace to work, gives a special quality to the relationship between directee and director. If a challenge is needed, it is done gently and with compassion. The relationship with God is born out in the fruits of the Spirit.

What Spiritual Direction is not...

Spiritual direction is not wrapping the directee in cotton wool; it is not avoiding risks; it is not avoiding the deepest issues; it is not taking away the directee's independence, nor crowding, nor demanding, nor judging, nor setting an agenda for the directee.

It is not categorizing, misinterpreting, dominating or manipulating; it is not sharing simply academic knowledge.

Spiritual direction is not putting words into the mouth of the directee, nor jumping ahead; it is not limiting communication to any one method, nor eliciting unnecessary information.

The role of director is not confined to clergy.

The title of Spiritual Director

Is a Spiritual Director a Spiritual Companion? Spiritual Friend? Soul Friend?

Spiritual Direction is an historical term. Both Spiritual Companion or Friend, and Soul Friend, are explicit and express the personal nature of the deep trust in the relationship. They imply a mutuality of relationship. All titles have some limitations. Spiritual Direction implies formality and directiveness. Friend or Companion may be unclear so far as mutuality and boundaries are concerned.

My own feeling is that Spiritual Director still provides an understanding of the essence of the relationship, the aim of which is to seek the presence and guidance of the Spirit.