



present

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Contemporary Spiritual Direction

By Paul Bramer

Spiritual direction or companionship has reemerged in contemporary Christian formation as an important exercise for cultivating spiritual growth.

Christian formation attempts to discover the divinely ordained way by which individuals and groups grow toward Christlikeness and to cooperate with that process (Munro 1956). Spiritual direction or companionship has reemerged in contemporary Christian formation as an important exercise for cultivating spiritual growth.

What is spiritual direction and why should it be practiced and encouraged? What should clergy and lay leaders know about this practice to integrate it into their lives and ministries?

There has been a new, increasing awareness, interest, and engagement in the ministry of spiritual direction in the past few decades. In the 20th century, there has been Christian education for instruction, small groups for study, prayer and fellowship, some discipling if you were young in the faith and pastoral counseling if you had a significant problem. But it was difficult to find someone or something to help provide personal attention to grow your spiritual life.

Eugene Peterson, spiritual author and translator of the Bible paraphrase, *The Message*, observes that for most of the history of the Christian faith it was expected that any person growing in the Christian faith would have a spiritual director. Spiritual

direction was not only for the beginner; in fact, "as responsibility and maturity increase in the life of faith, the urgency of having a spiritual director increases" (Peterson 1983b, 42).

While spiritual direction is of value for anyone, Peterson says, "It is not merely nice for pastors [and Christian leaders] to have a director; it is indispensable"

(Peterson 1987,). 115

Church lay leaders, parachurch staff, seminary students, pastors and teachers, missionaries, and mature Christians often tragically stumble and fall for lack of spiritual guidance, deep self-reflection, and growth in various spiritual disciplines. While spiritual direction is no guarantee of spiritual growth and health, it does provide an opportunity to review, discern, confess, envision, and deepen one's life before God in the presence of an empathetic and discerning listener.

Spiritual direction has not been customary in Protestantism; it has

been more prevalent in Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism. But today's need to address spiritual dryness, come to grips with addictions and pathological busyness, wrestle with ethical issues, make wise decisions, re-evaluate our image of God, and increase our sensitivity to the Spirit, make spiritual direction an essential component in the growing Christian leader's life. While this article focuses on spiritual direction in the Christian tradition, it is becoming common in other religious traditions as well (Addison 2000; Mabry 2014).

Defining Spiritual Direction

David Benner remarks that, "although spiritual guidance is the oldest of soul care traditions, it is probably the least familiar" (Benner 1988, 149). For some people, it carries the unfavorable connotations of a medieval religious system in which people are told in rigid detail how to live; it's true that spiritual direction in the past was often *authoritarian and prescriptive* but contemporary spiritual direction is the opposite of such caricatures and will lead to increased *inner freedom, grace, and gratitude*.

Gerald May defines spiritual formation as "all attempts, means, instruction, and disciplines intended toward deepening faith and furtherance of spiritual growth." Spiritual guidance "can apply to any situation in which people receive

help, assistance, attention, or facilitation in the process of their spiritual formation.” When spiritual guidance occurs in a “formal, one-to-one relationship, it can be called spiritual direction” (May 1982, 6). The one-to-one can be expanded to a one-to-group relationship in group spiritual direction (Kline 2006; Fryling, 2009).

“Spiritual” signals the experience of being led by the Spirit so that we can love God and our neighbor as Christ did; “direction” refers primarily to the work of God the Spirit who is our true and final director, to some extent facilitated by a mature Christian.

John of the Cross [d. 1591] in *The Living Flame of Love* writes, “These directors should reflect that they themselves are not the chief agent, guide, and mover of souls in this matter, but the principal guide is the Holy Spirit, who is never neglectful of souls, and themselves are instruments for directing these souls to maturity through faith and the law of God.” (John of the Cross 1991, 3:46, 691)

Terms other than spiritual direction are sometimes used such as spiritual companion (Benner 2002), spiritual friend (Edwards 1980), etc. The term by which the ministry is designated is not nearly so important as the essence of the ministry is present.

Formal individual spiritual direction is most often understood to occur when two people meet to discern the working and will of God and to develop the spiritual life of one of those persons through reviewing their experiences and consciously attending to the Holy Spirit. Usually

this is done face-to-face although the COVID pandemic has prompted the extensive use of video conferencing and telephone and sometimes email or letter. It is from the direction by letter that we get such classics as the anonymous 14th century *The Cloud of Unknowing*, the Brother Lawrence’s 17th century *The Practice of the Presence of God* (Lawrence 1958), and the 20th century correspondence of C. S. Lewis to some of his friends. While spiritual direction may be given

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(Benner 1988, 150)

occasionally, such as during a spiritual retreat, it is most often engaged in regularly, often monthly meetings. The rhythm is according to circumstance and need. As mentioned, direction can also be done in a group format (Edwards 1980, ch. 7; Muto and van Kaam 1998; See “Contexts of Spiritual Direction” in appendix) Casual and ad hoc spiritual direction is what Peterson says ministers are often doing when they don’t think they are doing anything important, “what takes place in the corners, in the unscheduled parts of their day.... off-hand” (Peterson 1987 104)

Spiritual direction should be distinguished from therapy and other forms of ministry. Spiritual direction is not the same as a Bible study, though the Bible may be consulted, quoted, and read contemplatively during the sessions. It is not fellowship or a casual conversation about theology or church matters, but a focused session on the matters in the life of one person as they relate to the personal, holy, and loving God. It is not leadership development or church consulting, although no leader should be without the kind of development which takes place in spiritual direction. It is not career mentoring, though God’s purpose for one’s life and its vocational ramifications will be discussed. It is not primarily an accountability relationship, to make sure you are keeping certain standards or commitments, though a measure of accountability arises from the meeting with a person to explore relationship and growth and manifestation of the Divine. It is not discipling if discipling is defined as helping a person learn the basics of Christian doctrine and practice through a curriculum. Spiritual direction typically takes its cue from the current events and issues in a person’s life. It is not psychotherapy or counselling.

Because spiritual direction is one genre of helping or facilitating relationships, it shares many features in common with various other types. But the lines must not be blurred to the point of forgetting that, “the most central aspect of spiritual [direction] is...discernment of the leading of the

Holy Spirit and nurture in Christian growth and spirituality” (Benner 1988, 150). May points out that psychotherapy, counselling, and pastoral counseling are different in content, intent, and characteristic atmosphere from spiritual direction (May 1982, 12-15). Psychotherapy and counselling attend to matters of psychological disorder, deficiency, and disease and to adjustment for healthy functioning in the world. Spiritual direction, while not ignoring pathologies, attends more to growth, gratitude, and grace. [See “Some Models of Spiritual Companionship” in the appendix]

The Scope of Contemporary Spiritual Direction

Typically, spiritual direction focuses on four areas: lifestyle and life experiences, prayer and devotional habits, decisions, and vocational discernment, and one’s relationship with God, which includes the person’s self.

Eugene Peterson summarizes the scope of spiritual direction as, “teaching people to pray, helping ... discern the presence of God in events and feelings, affirming the presence of God at the very heart of life, sharing a search for light through a dark passage in the pilgrimage, guiding the formation of a self-understanding that is biblically spiritual instead of merely psychological or sociological.” (Peterson 1986, 51)

Life and lifestyle review is a type of examen and includes remembering the past. When done with a spiritual director who helps invoke the

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awareness of God’s presence, the presence of God’s grace and our sin begin to appear like a message previously written in invisible ink and then painted with the right solution. In my first formal spiritual direction session, my director did little more than listen, as I recounted my childhood conversion, adolescent baptism, and subsequent rejection of the Christian faith. But as I spoke, I began to recognize the subconscious sin-agenda in me, the ego-serving and pleasure-seeking bias in my life and I appreciated more why some of the religious events in my life had been unsatisfactory. Near the end of my review, I began to feel the patience and grief of my earthly father and the protection and grace of my heavenly Father during those times. I was humbled, repentant, enlightened, and grateful: common fruit of this kind of examen. The events and configurations of relationships begin to bear witness that “all things do work together for good for them that love God and are the called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28). Ministry involvement, relationships, and responsibilities, the ordinary and the extraordinary of life, the distant as well as the recent

past—can all be objects of attention in spiritual direction.

A second aspect that usually receives attention in spiritual direction is our prayer life and the means of grace for strengthening and maturing us in our Christian life (Calhoun 2005, Foster 1978, Willard 1988). Practicing the presence of God (Lawrence 1958), a contemplative attitude, is the soul habit to which we aspire, using deliberate actions and occasions to foster this inner state. Related to this is the opposition we encounter in trying to live the Christ-life. Aspects of spiritual conflict, whether dealing with our baser instincts, reckoning with the lure of the pleasure-power-possessive world, or resisting the deception and assault of the enemy, will also eventually be part of the spiritual direction dialogue. Finding the appropriate practices for our temperament and situation is a matter for discussion and discernment with a director and so sometimes personality profiles such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI®) or the Enneagram will be useful. In my second spiritual direction session, one of the things I wanted to talk about was my prayer life - including methods I was using and experiences I was having. On this occasion my director gave a few suggestions for me to try out, one of which proved helpful in the following weeks.

A third major consideration in spiritual direction is wisdom for the choices we need to make in life. For that we need to discern the movement of the Spirit and the will of God. One major method which is

often used is the Ignatian approach. Ignatius Loyola wrote a manual in the 16th century for directors giving a thirty-day retreat, during which time the exercitant, under the guidance of a spiritual director, spends at least an hour a day in prayer and meditation on certain aspects of Christ's life (Loyola 1951). One of the main purposes of the *Spiritual Exercises* is to help a person become aware of the subtler ways by which God makes God's will known and to discern which inner impulses are of God and which are of the enemy. The Exercises are commonly used in times of making a decision concerning vocation, especially regarding whether to enter the ministry or marry. Loyola believed if God has unambiguously revealed God's will on a matter, there was no need for discernment. Obvious good should be done and obvious evil shunned. Where a decision is necessary but there is an indifferent attitude, the natural powers of reason and imagination can be used, such as making a list of pros and cons or imagining yourself on your deathbed looking back at this time to see if there were any regrets. Discernment proper assumes that a person desires the will of God and has some feelings about the matter. Desolation, in the form of confusion and lack of peace, can only be caused by the enemy to those who have made a fundamental option for God. However, God may allow this desolation to come as a means of showing us our negligence or testing our love or reminding us of the gratuitous nature of grace. Consolation or peace could come from either the good spirit or the bad spirit. The bad spirit gives false peace

and leaves a tell-tale mark at the beginning, middle, or end of a matter. But God gives without compromise and gives peace gratuitously. Spiritual direction will focus on discerning the will of God by testing the spirits or inner movements of the soul. The good director never decides for the directee but participates with him or her in the discerning process.

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Finally, the person's relationship with God and identity in Christ will be a theme in spiritual direction. This may involve such dimensions as self-image, self-esteem, and understanding justification, sanctification, and the indwelling Spirit. The need for people to explore gender roles, sexual orientation, aging, and other issues in order to come into a true sense of themselves is becoming more common in contemporary spiritual direction. During my third spiritual direction

session, I spent some time describing how happy I was that I had met the woman who became my wife, that she married me, and with the way she is such a comfort and support to me. Near the end, my director commented on the sacramentality of marriage and how my wife was a gift from God to me. He asked, "Would you like God to be like your wife?" and without qualifying it theologically, I unhesitatingly said "yes." Then for a few moments we sat in silence and tears welled up as I reflected on how good God was to work through other people, how well my wife mediated some important aspects of God to me, allowing me to experience them through her, and how in terms of gentleness, goodness, acceptance, loyalty, listening and loving, God was like my wife, and even more so.

The Work of a Spiritual Directee

A person seeks direction because of a desire for a deepening spiritual life and an awareness of the limitations of trying to walk the spiritual journey alone. Thomas Merton said, "Spiritual direction presupposes an ardent faith and a deep hunger for the word of God and for salvation [i.e., sanctification or spiritual growth]" (Merton 1960, 5). The spiritual directee must be prepared to do hard, honest soul work. Those seeking spiritual direction should: be serious about moving forward in their spiritual life, willing to engage in prayer, and to meet regularly with the director; be clear about their *spiritual focus*, willing to let God into the picture; be sufficiently trusting to at

least start to be honest about themselves and bring all of life under the grace and guidance of God. If this freedom and trust does not develop, a different director may be needed. The spiritual direction relationship should be the "*single*" relationship. The director should not also be your close friend, pastor, supervisor, or family member as that will usually create difficulties. Be clear and comfortable about all *arrangements*, whether financial, meeting circumstances, frequency, duration, etc.

Those who engage in the work entailed in spiritual direction will find much fruit. Marsha Crocket outlines seven, including the gifts of awakening, silence, and pilgrimage (Crocket 2022). Other gifts are self-reflection, encouragement, and growing confidence in walking in the way of the Lord Jesus.

The Work of a Spiritual Director

Spiritual direction is akin in some ways to marriage counselling. Before direction begins, there is already something that is happening; there is a relationship already established. Spiritual direction is in the service of that other relationship. Or to use the metaphor of a guide or friend, directors accompany others on their journeys. In particular, a director provides a forum for the directee to voice or explore her or his story. A director acts as a reflector and clarifier who brings input from the Bible, tradition, or personal experience (where helpful) to bring light and comfort. A director is a

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supporter, encourager, and burden-sharer. At times, she or he becomes a challenger, the speaker of a call or a prophetic word. The director can be a memory for the other person, reminding them of the past and restoring perspective. Some aspects of the work of spiritual direction are captured in Paul's letter to the Thessalonians when he reviews his ministry among them:

We were gentle among you, like a [mother] tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us... You are witnesses, and God also, how pure, upright, and blameless our conduct was toward you believers. As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children, urging and encouraging you and pleading that you lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory. (1 Thess. 2.7-8, 10-12, NRSV)

What are the qualifications of a good spiritual director? Reginald Somerset Ward, who died in 1962, was supported by an anonymous donor allowing him to exercise a peripatetic (nomadic) ministry of spiritual direction in England for nearly fifty years. With a twinkle in his eye, he stated that the ingredients for one pound of spiritual direction was made of "eight ounces of prayer, three ounces of theology, three ounces of common sense, and two ounces of psychology" (Goodacre 1983, 389). Teresa of Avila, who had her share of poor directors, but tested even the best to their limit, wrote:

So, it is very important the [spiritual director] have prudence—I mean that he have good judgement—and experience; if besides these [s]he has learning, so much the better. But if one cannot find these three qualifications together, the first two are more important since men [and women] with a background in studies can be sought out and consulted where there is need" (Teresa of Avila [Teresa of Jesus] 1987, 130).

Present

Though spiritual direction is not a regulated profession, nor does it require certification, licensure, or ordination, today most spiritual directors have had training, typically a part-time two-year or equivalent program that includes a practicum, and often have additional theological education and other professional experience. In any case, first-hand experience in prayer and ministry, an ability to listen and co-discern the Spirit's leading, and a willingness to engage in the ministry of spiritual direction are the fundamental qualifications. Directors are encouraged to be in supervision, participate in professional associations, and engage in continuing education. In the past, spiritual direction was usually the domain of the ordained, but most spiritual directors now are lay people, who provide direction part-time. While spiritual direction is a ministry of the church, in practice many directors's ministries are not based in local congregations or denominations. This has led to more professionalized and independent practices. A more concerted effort on the part of both directors and churches will be needed to rectify this situation. Depending on many factors, directors may offer direction as part of another ministry (such as a retreat leader or minister), for *gratis*, or for a fee.

Discernment will come from God-centeredness and God-giftedness. Gifts of the Spirit such as wisdom, knowledge, discernment of spirits, healing, mercy, or teaching are helpful in spiritual direction and can help in

discernment. The fruit of the Spirit gives the director the taste for what is true. Laplace speaks of the need for docility in the Holy Spirit in contrast to willfulness, purity of heart instead of manipulation, the peace of God in place of anxiety, and largeness of heart rather than pettiness (Laplace 1975). These bear remarkable resemblance to the fruit of the Spirit of love, peace, patience, and gentleness. Spirit-led living is the best training for the discernment of the working of the Spirit in the life of another and an appreciation that spiritual growth is engineered and accomplished by the Holy Spirit in responsive souls.

There must be a willingness and ability to do a spiritual work. Prayerful listening is the main task, so directors must be willing to exercise themselves in both kinds of work simultaneously. May states that, "The primary task of spiritual directors is to encourage within themselves this moment-by-moment attention towards God as frequently as possible during spiritual direction sessions" (May 1982, 95). Carl Rogers' non-directive approach to therapeutic and educational relationships, characterized by person-centeredness, empathy, unconditional positive regard, and active listening (Rogers 1961), has been highly influential in the spiritual direction movement. This approach meshes well with the belief that the spiritual director needs to be mostly non-directive, so that the true director, the Holy Spirit, can do this work. This does not prohibit the director from speaking a forthright

word in wisdom or under the Spirit's guidance, but it means that the director acts more like a guest in the relationship between the directee and the Lord.

Knowledge of how people grow spiritually, types and aspects of prayer and the spiritual disciplines, as well as the religious traditions relevant to the directee and director are necessary. A broad base will keep directors from imposing their own experience, style, or tradition on the directee. Knowledge of psychology and theology will be helpful also, but these must operate in the background and not be allowed to supplant the Spirit's agenda and the central work of spiritual direction.

The Present Need for Spiritual Direction

One-with-one help, especially in evangelical Protestant circles, has tended to be oriented either towards addressing pathologies or getting someone "involved" in leadership. Sometimes we take time to coach someone who shows "leadership potential" with a view to their becoming more effective as a church or para-church worker. However, those who are not emotionally traumatized or in need of grooming for ministry, but just want to deepen their walk with the Lord are often neglected. For them we deem regular church attendance and some ministry involvement, supplemented, we hope, by their daily devotions and some Christian literature, to be enough. Often that is all we have ourselves and often that is not enough. Many people today are entering deeper

waters, through desire for the Lord, dissatisfaction with superficiality, having religious experiences, or wanting to meet the challenge of life stages and events with more than a coping mentality, and they are looking for people who can act as spiritual guides or directors. They want to know and experience prayer, holistic Christian growth, spiritual warfare, and effective ministry in a deeper way. People engaging in ministry are always entering deeper waters.

Spiritual direction is not all we need for spiritual well-being; it is only one component in a balanced Christian environment, though a critical one. It is not a substitute for such practices

Spiritual direction can help us become more faithful, more present, and more fruitful; it is a practice worth adopting and a ministry worth developing.

as worshipping with the body of Christ, for preaching from the pulpit, for group Bible study and sharing, and regular private devotions, each of which provides a type and degree of spiritual direction [see Contexts and Levels of Soul Care in appendix]. Rather, it focuses and enriches these other means of spiritual growth and care.

Conclusion

Spiritual direction is one of the simplest and "poorest" of ministries. No technology, no special facilities, no advertising campaigns, no crowds, no recordings, no prepared curriculum—just two people meeting together to foster development into Christlikeness and to experience the

promise of Jesus that "where two or three of you are gathered in my name, I will be in your company" (Mt 18:20). And the results, at first glance, may be just as imperceptible as the importance of the meeting. They are the qualitative and cumulative differences in the life of one person, which will subtly affect the lives of those he or she is in touch with. It is a soul experiencing more enjoyment in prayer, more victory in meeting temptation, more assurance in vocational decision, more fruit of the Spirit, more freedom in living and serving, and more glory to God because as an early church father said, "the glory of God is a person fully alive" (Irenaeus c180/1887, 4:20:7). ▲

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Some Models of Spiritual Companionship

MODEL	NATURE OF CONTACT	FOCUS	INTENT and FUNCTION
Discipling	Formal	Curriculum on the Christian life	Instruct; Model; Exhort; Mutual Involvement
Spiritual Direction	Contracted	God amid life; Spiritual development.	Evoke; Clarify; Listen to God; Foster prayer.
Spiritual Guidance	Occasional	Crisis and its spiritual issues; Vocational decisions.	Seek God amid life's questions; Attend to the Spirit.
Spiritual Friendship	Casual	Spiritual journeys of each; Mutual relationship; Life sharing.	Support; Attend to Spirit; Intercede; Accompany on the journey.
Confession	As needed	Resistances to God; Rebellious self-will and its consequences in inner life and outer relationships.	Facilitate disclosure; Recognize inner springs beneath outer symptoms; Enable confession to God and appropriation of forgiveness.
Prayer Counseling	Short-term	Healing of inner hurts, blockages, and distorted images of God.	Discernment; Healing of memories; Inner healing; Liberation of person from bondage.
Pastoral Counseling	As needed; Contracted	Mental and emotional life; Relational difficulties.	Diagnose; Lead toward insight; Promote more effective living; Deal with spiritual implications and resources.
Coaching	Contracted	Developing skills, habits, practices and attitudes in life, leadership, or some specific area of functioning.	Help another achieve specific personal or professional goals by providing training, advice and guidance.

Adapted by Paul Bramer from Reginald Johnson, "Spiritual Guidance." Course at Ontario Theological Seminary, North York, Ontario, Summer 1993.

