

SPIRITUAL COMPANIONING

WHAT IS THIS THING CALLED SPIRITUAL DIRECTION?

“One beggar showing another beggar where to find bread” is an apt description of spiritual direction. In this ancient metaphor we see the two essential qualities for being a spiritual companion: attending to the Presence of God with one ear while simultaneously attending to another hungry soul with the other. (In this respect spiritual direction differs from modern psychological counseling that usually has a more problem-centered focus—though some persons may be involved in both at times.)

One beggar. The desire to find a spiritual guide needs to grow out of a deepening desire for *companionship with God*. Because so much of spiritual companioning is “the art of holy listening,” it’s essential that the guide and seeker both spend time between and during the meetings “listening with God”—which is a good definition of contemplative prayer.

Showing other beggars. The desire to help others find spiritual direction needs to grow mutually out of the guide and seeker hungering for God at the center of all life experiences—grieving and celebrating, working and playing. Awareness is everything: the guide’s own neediness can assist in being closer to God and more present for others—or it could get in the way.

Where to find bread. Spiritual direction isn’t just talk; it’s a holy conversation about finding and following the One who nurtures a hungry soul intent on seeking “the Bread of life” in the very ordinary stuff of life. The guide encourages the seeker to cultivate spiritual disciplines—praying with scripture, meditating, journaling, retreating—that help a person to pay attention to the rhythms of grace in the gifts and struggles in the world of action.

A MANY COLORED COAT

This ancient art is “a many colored coat” that goes by varied names: spiritual direction, spiritual guidance, spiritual companionship or friendship, soul friends (Irish *anamchara*), spiritual mentoring, or discipling—and the *rebbe-hasid* tradition in Judaism. It has biblical roots: the friendship of David and Jonathan, Ruth and Naomi, Paul and Silas—even in the relationship of Jesus with “the beloved disciple.” Through the ages there have been many examples: Francis of Assisi and Claire, John Calvin and John Knox, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Eberhard Bethge, Evelyn Underhill and Baron von Hugel, Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King, Jr. It is two persons encouraging and praying for one another, with some mutual giving-receiving (Romans 1:11–12)—even when it is a disciple-mentor relationship.

FORMAL AND INFORMAL

The many “names” reflect unique facets of one experience. “Spiritual direction” conveys a more formalized relationship, and speaks of *discernment*—finding a sense of direction for one’s life. “Spiritual companioning” (*com-panis* in Latin—literally “bread with”) speaks of more reciprocity: yet the one friend clearly needs to be the guide—one beggar *showing* another by example, story, listening, praying.

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

1. How do I find a spiritual director?

Always begin by praying: “What qualities do I desire in a spiritual companion? What are my needs and hopes for this experience? Does it matter if the person is male or female? Within my own tradition or outside it?” It needs to be a safe person; a close colleague may not have perspective. Journal your responses. Then pray by networking: ask others about persons with training for this ministry—lay or clergy.

2. How do I begin?

Get a couple of names, talk by phone, then ask for an initial visit to converse about the qualities you seek, your expectations. *Pray—then go with one that seems right for you.* Keep open to the serendipity of the Spirit! *Create an informal covenant together* (sample on reverse side). You might want to commit to meeting for six months—then evaluate the process to see if both of you sense it is life-giving for the long-term.

3. How frequently do we meet?

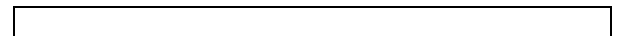
Usually monthly, though it’s good to meet every couple of weeks for the first two or three sessions. The monthly rhythm seems helpful so the relationship does not become too problem-centered or co-dependent. That way you’re forced to seek the direction of the Spirit as you pray for each other between meetings. But if less than monthly it’s hard to know how to be in prayer for the other.

4. What about money?

Spiritual direction has traditionally been “a gift of the church to the church for the sake of the world,” yet the companion would offer some form of contribution. Ask the guide what’s expected—from a token gift to a set charge—or a contribution to the person, or to a benevolent fund of their church or institution.

5. Can two persons serve as companions for each other?

Two Christian friends can always meet! But this works best under three conditions. *First*, keep your expectations primarily to being a “listening partner”—which is also the best advice for experienced spiritual directors! *Second*, be very intentional to set aside a time for listening to the one person (about fifty minutes), then take a break or switch seats, or meet at a different time—when the other will be the listener. *Third*, read some good books and consider training in this ancient art. (Alternatively, think about group spiritual direction.)



A SAMPLE COVENANT

1. We will *contract for six meetings*, then assess at that time whether to continue.
2. Each will *share expectations* at an early session, and at other times, to see how these fit with our our purpose. (Referrals may be suggested for other kinds of help.)
3. We will take time for *meditation, prayer and silence* at the beginning and/or during each session.
4. The seeker and guide will be intentional in cultivating *practices of personal and corporate prayer*.
5. The guide will make suggestions of *ways to offer what's going on to God* – and to listen to the Spirit's invitation.
6. We covenant *to pray for each other* between meetings: "How can I be praying for you?"
7. The guide will ask how the seeker wants to grow – then *trust the Spirit to help discern* what form Christ takes in that one's life.
8. We will discuss and agree on a *monetary arrangement*.
9. We will normally meet *monthly*. If necessary to cancel, one will call the other a week ahead or as soon as known – and at that time offer *possible times to reschedule*.
10. If either decides to end the companion relationship, we will plan a final session to give each other *the gift of closure and blessing*.

A BRIEF BIBLIOGRAPHY

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