



Spiritual direction or accompaniment and you

It can be helpful for many people to have a spiritual guide/companion (traditionally: 'director'). Often this desire grows from a fruitful experience of such a relationship, typically during a Week of Accompanied Prayer or individually guided retreat.

The choice of a companion for a long-term relationship is likely to have important consequences in your life: so it is important to choose carefully.

What is spiritual direction?

Spiritual direction is a ministry within God's church which listens for the guidance of the Holy Spirit and recognises that the spiritual director is accompanier and witness to a process between the person receiving direction (the 'directee') and the Holy Spirit of God. The director is there to foster and encourage the directee's attention to God in the service of developing their personal journey of discipleship. Spiritual direction is the most common historic term for this ministry; others are soul friendship or spiritual accompaniment. In this leaflet we will alternate deliberately between using 'guide' and 'director'.

There are other forms of conversation about spiritual things that would not fall under the heading of spiritual direction. For example, the distinction between a prayer partner and a spiritual director is that the focus of a spiritual direction conversation is only on the directee's relationship with God. The spiritual director is a person with a certain objectivity (not a friend) who helps the directee discern God's leading.

The traditional term 'director' can be misleading, because such a companion or director will not tell you what to do. They are there to help you sharpen your own awareness of God in your life. Typically you would expect to meet with a guide 4-8 times a year, for an hour or so, and reflect together on your experience of God over the last months.

Who are spiritual directors?

Recently, an increasing range of people have come to make use of spiritual direction, and an increasing range of people have sensed a calling to work in this field. The broadening of spiritual direction has led to a situation where there are two kinds of spiritual directors: firstly those (generally clergy) who have undertaken this work as part of their wider role without any formal training; secondly, those who have undertaken a course in spiritual direction explicitly in order to undertake this form of listening ministry.

Although training courses vary, most work towards a standard of professional competence that borrows elements of counselling practice, for example the expectation of supervision. This is absolutely not to imply that those directors who have not undergone this training act

unprofessionally. Many such directors with years of experience are evidently guided by the Spirit in their work, and are a great benefit to their directees.

Spiritual direction is not therapeutic listening, and directors are right to insist that their work should not be treated as counselling by another name. However, it is a form of stewardship in the service of others. If the director receives the directee as Christ and seeks to discern the working of God with them, that implies giving them the best possible attention and advice.

In the south central region, which includes Portsmouth diocese, we have adopted a set of good practice guidelines for spiritual directors, covering issues such as supervision, ongoing training and safeguarding.

Choosing a spiritual guide/ companion/ director

Choosing a guide is a very personal decision. As you seek a director, pray for light. You may well find that you become increasingly clear about what you hope for from the relationship. Do think about this, so as to make a conscious decision – but in the end, you may want to trust your instinct.

The questions below are offered simply as points to mull over and then bear in mind as you look for someone. The list is not exhaustive; and some points mentioned may seem to you unimportant, whereas others not mentioned may seem crucial.

Qualities you hope for

Different factors matter to different people. As you reflect, also ask yourself why you have made a particular choice.

- Do you especially want your guide to be a woman or a man?
- A lay person, a priest/minister, or a member of a religious order?
- Would you like your guide to be a member of the same denomination?
- Does it matter what particular Christian tradition your director comes from?
- Do you mind whether your guide is older or younger than yourself?
- To what extent would you like conversation to feel formal or informal?
- Is it important to you that your director is grounded in a particular tradition (eg Benedictine, evangelical, charismatic), or would you like someone with an eclectic approach?
- Do you hope for a guide who shares an interest in something important to you in your prayer life (e.g. music, poetry, painting, clay?)
- Would you prefer your director to be someone whom you will not meet in any other context?

Some people have concerns about their guide's own preparation; others see this as a matter for the guide.

- Would you like someone who makes a clear distinction between spiritual direction and counselling/psychotherapy, or one who sees overlaps between them?
- Do you want your guide to have any specific training in spiritual direction (eg in the Ignatian tradition)?
- Is it important to you that your director be practised in a particular personality indicator (Myers-Briggs or the Enneagram)?
- Are you concerned about whether your guide makes an annual retreat?
- Do you want to know whether your director has her or his own director?
- Do you want to know whether your guide has access to supervision?

Practicalities

As well as questions about the nature of the relationship, there are practical factors which may affect your decision.

- How often do you hope to meet (eg monthly, every two months, every three months, by arrangement)?
- Are you able to travel to meet the guide, or do you need to be visited at home? How far are you willing to travel?
- Might it be important (eg because of recurrent illness) that the relationship could be conducted by correspondence at some stage?
- Would this relationship affect, or be affected by any other one-to-one meetings you are having (eg counselling, therapy)?
- How do you view the question of payment? Some spiritual directors are able to offer this ministry without charge, while others will welcome a contribution in recognition of their time and the costs of their own training and supervision. (If you are in employment and are invited to make a donation, a possible guideline is whatever you yourself would earn in an hour).
- When you have a potential guide in mind, are you able to discuss your choice with someone who has experience of this person?

You may already have someone in mind, or know someone who can suggest possible guides. The diocesan spirituality adviser holds lists of available spiritual directors; a conversation with her can help clarify your thoughts, and she is always ready to receive enquiries about this ministry. Her contact details are at the end of this paper.

The spiritual directors come from a variety of Christian traditions; some will charge or ask for a donation, and some will not. Some may indicate a particular area of interest, but you can be confident that a guide will guide you as you discern your own path with God, and not push you into being like them.

The first meeting

The first meeting will be exploratory – a chance for you to get to know one another, to compare what you hope for with what the guide can offer. Your guide may suggest that you meet a few times and then review the relationship together. Throughout, do say honestly what you think and feel about your meetings.

Preparing for a meeting

Your meetings will be most fruitful if you prepare for them. Pray that the Spirit may illuminate your reflection.

- Looking back over the time since the last meeting, what has been going on in your life? How have you been feeling? What have been your prevailing moods during this period?
- Have there been moments when you have been particularly aware of God's presence or activity in your life? How did you feel at those times? Have there been any surprises?
- What are your current preoccupations? In your innermost heart, what do you most hope for?

Reviewing the relationship

For the relationship to be fruitful there must be commitment: this is a spiritual discipline, and it may take time for you to get to know each other and for confidence to grow. Nevertheless, it is good from time to time to reflect on the relationship.

- How do you feel as you prepare for a meeting?
- How do you feel during meetings? Are you confident that what you say is heard?
- Do you feel accepted and respected or insecure and judged?
- Do you feel supported or alone? Do you feel accompanied or pressured?

- Can you say what you want to say? Are you able to be completely honest, or are you aware of reserve?
- Are any periods of silence comfortable or uncomfortable?
- Is humour a part of your meetings? Do you feel at ease?
- Do you feel challenged? If so, how do you respond to this?
- When guidance has been offered or an activity suggested, was this helpful? Did you feel free to follow it or to lay it aside?
- Do you think that the relationship still has something to offer? How might you help it to continue fruitful?
- Do you feel that the relationship may have become stuck? Might it be time for a change? Is this something you feel called to talk over with your guide?

Diocesan Spirituality Adviser

The Revd Dr Ruth Tuschling
Ruth.tuschling@portsmouth.anglican.org
023 9289 9686

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