



The art of holy listening

It's a common question: Just what is this 'spiritual direction' thing I keep hearing about?

By Tammy Wiens

Until it happened to me, I could not imagine how a faith that was genuine could succumb to unbelief. I heard friends talk about coming through a season of questioning with a renewed sense of faith in God's love and provision. But there were just as many who never reached the other side of doubt, becoming cynical and ultimately rejecting the faith they'd once held dear.

After my own faith was crushed under the weight of personal crises, I became far more understanding and compassionate—no longer able to stand in judgment of others. My perception of God and my naïve sense of entitlement to divine intervention toppled like Humpty Dumpty off the proverbial wall. I felt as if I were standing ghost-like on the edge of the scene, staring at what had once been my life, befuddled by the shards of faith that lay in ruins at my feet.

Finding a spiritual director did for me what “all the king's horses and all the king's men” could not do for poor Humpty. Entering into a relationship with a spiritual director gave me the tools and the support I needed to

meet God in a new way, to discover the value of “holy listening,” and to make peace with my former disillusionment. I came to appreciate what Paul meant when he testified: “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies” (2 Corinthians 4:8–10).

What happens in spiritual direction?

In my case a crisis led to the discovery of spiritual direction. But meeting with a director is just as transformative for people who are not in crisis and would like simply to strengthen their relationship with God. Spiritual direction is more analogous to regularly working out in a gym than to dashing off to the emergency room.

Episcopal priest Margaret Guenther uses “holy listening” to describe the art of spiritual direction. The phrase has a double meaning, describing both the work of the



director who is attentive to the directee, and the work of the directee who is attentive to the Holy Spirit.

Most of us move so quickly through life that our prayers are often delivered on the run, and usually we're the ones doing all of the talking. Rarely do we take in the signs of God's presence, or take the time to listen for what God might have to say. A spiritual guide who knows how to come alongside us without being intrusive can help us slow down the pace of life before we reach a crisis. When we still the noise of daily living, we are able to sense the richness of God's boundless love. We discover that the Spirit is all around us!

Spiritual direction takes place when two people agree together to seek God's will and direction in their lives. But it's more than just two people meeting together. In his book *Spiritual Director, Spiritual*

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Companion, Tilden Edwards describes spiritual direction as a "three-way relationship: among the true director who is the Holy Spirit ... the human director ... and the directee."

Trusting the Holy Spirit to guide the process is key to understanding one of the differences between spiritual direction and therapy. In a counseling setting it is the therapist's expertise in psychology and the social sciences that assist a person in acquiring new life skills

and moving toward greater psychological and emotional health. In spiritual direction both the director and the directee put their trust in the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Elizabeth Liebert, professor of spiritual life at San Francisco Theological Seminary, describes spiritual direction as "one Christian assisting another to discover and live out in the context of the Christian community his or her deepest values and life goals in response to God's initiative."

Spiritual direction might focus on spiritual things such as one's prayer life, questions about faith, or how to get more involved in the life of the church. But the conversation is just as likely to focus on everyday things—from workplace ethics to parenting a toddler or difficult teenager; from resolving a disagreement with a grouchy neighbor or relative to making a career change.

Who invented spiritual direction?

The recent surge of interest in spiritual direction does not mean that this is a new idea. We see examples of people seeking spiritual counsel in both the Old and New Testaments. Samuel received spiritual direction from his mentor Eli, and David received spiritual direction from the prophet Nathan. Jesus served as a spiritual guide in day-to-day interactions with his disciples, and the Apostle Paul was spiritual director for young Timothy as he began his ministry.

As Christianity spread and the church began to grow, there was a great need for training in spiritual growth. In an article on the Spiritual Directors International website author Marian Cowan notes: "In the early church, people flocked to hermits in the desert for spiritual counsel. Across the centuries we find striking examples in some Irish monks, in some German Benedictine nuns, in Charles de Foucault, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Francis de Sales, and others."

In the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) the Spiritual Formation Leadership Network began in 2001 with a small group of spiritual directors who were looking for a way to build relationships with Presbyterian colleagues who shared an interest in this ministry. Today there are more than 200 spiritual directors registered with the network, and this represents only a fraction of those in the church at large.

Beyond the PC(USA), Spiritual Directors International (www.sdiworld.org), a professional association committed to advancing spiritual direction around the world, has more than 5,000 spiritual directors listed in its directory for the United States alone.

Who can be a spiritual director?

The most important attributes of a Christian spiritual director are

One of the differences between spiritual direction and therapy is that in spiritual direction both parties trust the Holy Spirit to guide the process.

a deep love for God, a deep love of Scripture and knowledge of Christian history with special attention to the contemplative traditions of the church. A spiritual director may be someone whose primary work is spiritual direction, but this is not always the case. Spiritual directors come from all walks of life and have a variety of experiences. A spiritual director does not have to be an ordained pastor; in many instances an elder or other layperson in the church will emerge as a gifted spiritual advisor.

Sam Hamilton Poore, director of San Francisco Theological Seminary's program in Christian Spirituality, points out that the essential skills of spiritual directors "vary widely in depth and breadth. Ideally a spiritual director has received special training, formation, and supervision in listening for the presence and movement of the Holy in their own and other lives, the life of the church, etc."

How is spiritual direction different from talking to a pastor?

Certainly it is within the pastor's job description to offer spiritual guidance, but "spiritual direction" is a specialized ministry that involves more than what your pastor may be willing and able to offer. Here are few talking points you and your pastor (or any potential spiritual director) might discuss to help you decide if he or she is willing and able to enter into a relationship with you as a spiritual director:

- How do you understand the ministry of spiritual direction?
- Have you studied or received training in the art of spiritual direction?
- Do you have your own spiritual director?
- Would you be willing to meet once a month to guide me in my walk with God and respond to the Spirit's movement in my life?

Pastors are called on to do a variety of tasks, and it is only natural that each pastor will want to focus in areas where he or she is particularly gifted for ministry. If spiritual direction is not one of the pastor's gifts, he or she may be able to refer you to someone who has the appropriate training and gifts.

What about spiritual direction for groups?

A group of 5–8 people may covenant together to seek God's truth and love and hold one another accountable for the ways in which they might neglect or turn away from God. They meet regularly to read Scripture, pray, seek God's loving care and direction in their daily lives, and look for signs of God's presence and action in the world around them.

What makes group spiritual direction different from other types of groups in the church is the intentionality of meeting solely to attend to the holy. Alice Fryling writes in her recent book *Seeking God Together* that the purpose of group spiritual direction is to offer "a place where individuals can experience what it means to be listened to and loved by others, so that they can learn to listen more attentively to God in their daily lives and be used by God to spread God's grace and love throughout the world."

Tammy Wiens is associate for spiritual formation for the General Assembly Mission Council of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

How to find your own spiritual director

By Alice Fryling

Gather names. Talk with someone who is meeting with a spiritual director. You may find a network of directors-who-know-directors, giving you a pool to choose from. Check online for local training programs and directories of spiritual directors.

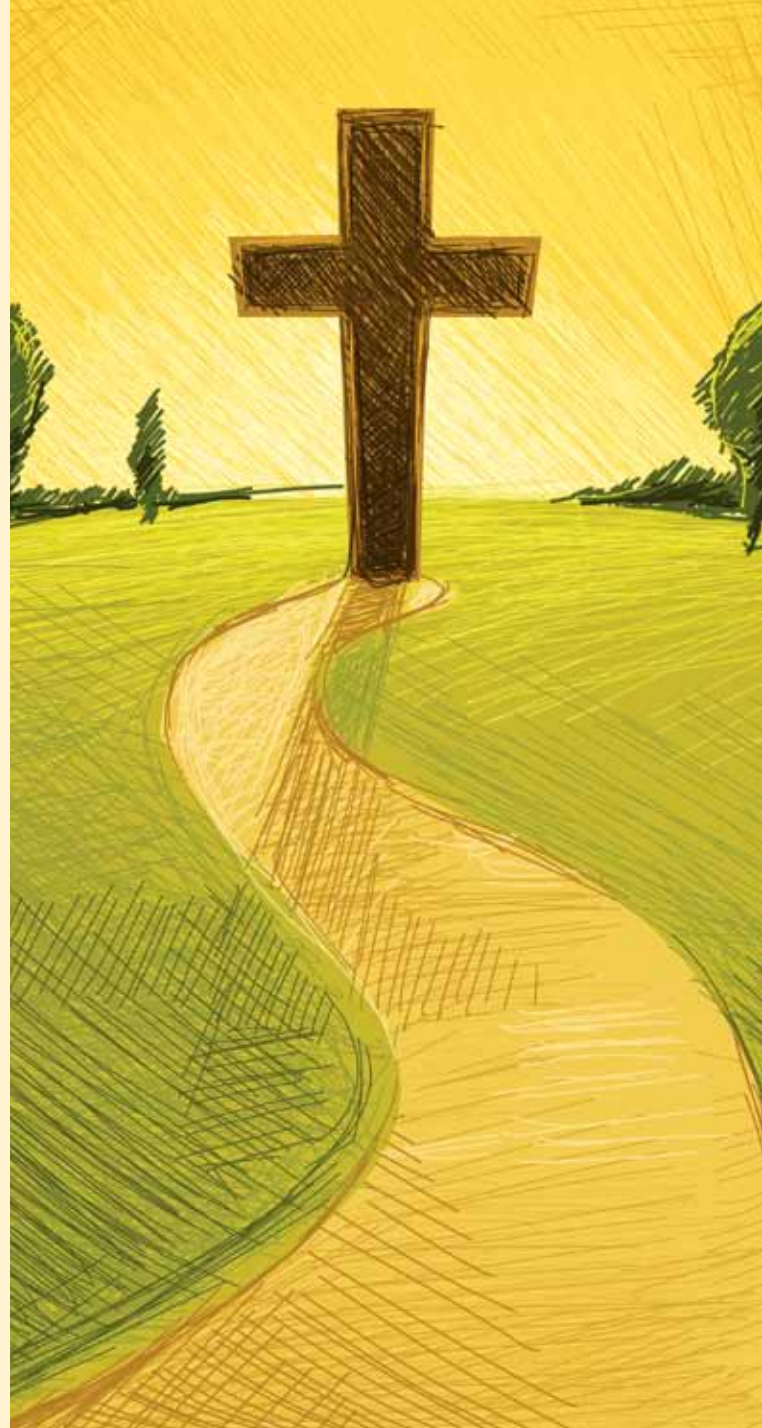
Consider what you are looking for. Are you seeking to address a specific issue in your life, or would you like a relationship where someone accompanies you on the long-term spiritual journey? Do you see yourself as a new believer who would like help with spiritual disciplines, or are you a veteran of the spiritual life who is seeking ongoing encouragement? What kind of spiritual relationships are life-giving to you? Is there anything that might be threatening or stifling?

Consider who you are looking for. A man or woman? Someone older than you or younger? Someone in your denomination or from outside your tradition? You may not find the “perfect” fit, but it will be helpful to set priorities.

Pray that God will guide you to someone who will help you experience God’s love more deeply as you continue on the spiritual journey.

Make phone calls and ask questions to find someone you can connect with personally. Remember to ask about logistics: Where will you meet? How long is an average session? Is there a monetary fee involved? What expectations might this director have for you?

Evaluate the relationship. Ask your spiritual director if you can have a brief time of evaluation after three or four sessions, just to be sure you both are comfortable with where you are going. It often takes a year for a spiritual direction relationship to flourish, but if you sense that it is not working well for you, address this early. Each relationship is unique, creative and dynamic. That is what makes spiritual direction such a life-giving experience.



SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

Where to go for more information

CONTACT

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ONLINE

For information about the PC(USA)'s Spiritual Formation Leadership Network, finding a spiritual director, programs

that give training in spiritual direction, planning an event with a focus on spirituality and other resources:
www.pcusa.org/spiritualformation

BOOKS

The God-bearing Life: The Art of Soul Tending for Youth Ministry, by Kenda Creasy Dean and Ron Foster (Upper Room, 1998)

Holy Listening, by Margaret Guenther (Cowley Publications, 1992)

The Pastor as Spiritual Guide, by Howard Rice (Upper Room, 1998)

Seeking God Together: An Introduction to Group Spiritual Direction, by Alice Fryling (InterVarsity Press, 2009)

Spiritual Friend: Reclaiming the Gift of Spiritual Direction, by Tilden Edwards (Paulist Press, 1980)

The Way of Discernment: Spiritual Practice for Decision Making, by Elizabeth Liebert (Westminster John Knox Press, 2008)