

# Spiritual Direction

## A Ministry for Everyone

By John R. Mabry

The story is told in Ireland of St. Brigid, who was concerned about one of her young wards who often came to share lunch with her. One day she said to him, “Do you have a soul-friend?”

“I do,” he replied.

“Then let us prepare for his requiem mass,” Brigid said.

“Why?” asked the boy.

“Just as you had finished half your meal, I saw that your soul-friend died.”

“How did you know?” the student asked.

“I saw you halfway through your meal without a head, for your soul-friend was dead.” Brigid answered. “And now, eat no more until you find a new soul-friend, for a person without a soul-friend is a body without a head” (“Soul Friendship” by Diarmuid O’Laoghaire, SJ, in *Traditions of Spiritual Guidance*).

Just as “two heads are better than one” in many of life’s arenas, it is just as true in one’s spiritual life. A spiritual director, or “soul friend,” is someone who listens to people’s spiritual stories, walks beside people as they contemplate their relationship with God and others, and assists people in their spiritual discernments.

### The History of the Ministry

Spiritual direction is an ancient ministry that goes back to the very beginning of the church. St. Paul’s letters are an epistolary form of spiritual direction, as are the non-canonical letters of Clement, Polycarp and others. The practice of meeting face to face is at least as old as the Desert Fathers and Mothers of the fourth century.

When the church was embraced by the Roman empire, many sincere Christians were horrified by what they saw their religion turning into. Instead of the small, intimate gatherings in people’s homes, Christianity became a public spectacle and many people were joining for reasons more political than pious.

Hoping to recapture or redeem the spirituality they remembered, many people went into the

desert to practice an ascetic and “purified” form of the faith.

Some of those monks and nuns in the desert became extremely adept at listening to the spiritual struggles of their fellow cave-dwellers, and gained a reputation for their compassion and wisdom. Through word of mouth the fame of these “Desert Fathers and Mothers” spread to the cities, and before long laypeople were journeying to the desert to seek the counsel of the Fathers and Mothers. The ministry of spiritual direction in the Christian tradition was off and running.

Unfortunately, the leadership of the church in the West was uncomfortable with laypeople serving as spiritual companions, and tried to subsume the ministry into the sacrament of confession. This was never entirely successful, however, as the Spirit has always called non-ordained women and men to companion people without heed to the “rules.”

And unlike the hierarchical ministry of the priestly confessor, the spiritual director is not an authority figure, but instead a fellow pilgrim who offers companionship more than advice, encouragement more than correction, and a listening ear rather than penance to be performed.

### Spiritual Direction Today

While many people in the Anglican tradition have seen spiritual directors as people frequented primarily by seminarians and clergy, this perception is changing. The last twenty years has seen a huge boom in the ministry of spiritual direction, as people in the pews are no longer content to sit back and leave their spiritual lives to the professional clergy. Instead, they are taking their spirituality into their own hands, getting intentional about their spiritual lives and their intimacy with divinity, and in this, meeting with a spiritual director is an enormous help.

Contemporary spiritual direction has a lot in common with psychotherapy, at least on the surface. A meeting with one’s spiritual director looks an awful lot like a trip to the therapist’s office: a

*A spiritual director is someone who listens to people’s spiritual stories... and assists people in their discernments.*

person makes an appointment with a spiritual director, and meets his or her director in a pleasant and private office. They talk for about an hour, and then make an appointment for next time. Usually, the client will pay the director a set fee. The director may or may not ask the client to do some spiritual “homework” to be discussed at the next session.

To the casual observer, a visit to the therapist and the spiritual director is indistinguishable, and in fact, a client may discuss many of the same issues in either venue. But that is where the resemblance ends. Spiritual directors are not focused upon psychological pathology, and usually steer clear of offering any therapeutic advice.

Instead of discussing one’s emotional life, a spiritual direction session is focused on one’s spiritual life: How should I pray? How can I feel God’s presence in my life at work? How is God calling me to minister to those around me? Why does it feel like God has abandoned me? How should a person of faith respond in such-and-such a situation? These are the kinds of questions addressed in the spiritual direction session.

### The Art of Noticing

As spiritual direction is a non-heirarchical relationship, a spiritual director does not assume he or she knows any more than his or her clients. Every client is the expert on his or her own spiritual life, and good spiritual directors are primarily good listeners.

In addition to listening, though, the primary skill of spiritual direction is that of noticing. We are too close to our own children to notice that they are growing from day to day, but when uncles and aunts see them at family gatherings every couple of months, they often exclaim how much they’ve grown!

Just so, we are often too close to our own spiritual lives to notice the subtle changes, promptings, and learnings that are happening all the time. When we

meet with a spiritual director, however, he or she is often amazed at the growth that has occurred in just a month’s time! Because they have a little distance from our lives, spiritual directors often notice the subtle ways the Spirit is working in our lives that might otherwise go unnoticed.

Discernment is also an important aspect of spiritual direction. We all have difficult decisions to make in our lives, and many of these decisions have spiritual bearing. When “Maria” came to me for spiritual direction, she was overwhelmed by her job, and finding very little time to spend in relationship with her son, God, or even herself! Through the quiet conversation of our direction session, the truth emerged that she was burning out and needed to rest and tend to her inner life. Directly after the session she booked a vacation, and invited her son to join her. At the next session, she was a new woman, and had even found time on her trip to pray. The discernment made in our session had helped to put her “busy-ness” in perspective and re-prioritize things.

Spiritual directors also help people pay attention to interior movements of the Spirit that we are often too busy to listen to. Sometimes it is hard to distinguish between our ever-mutable emotions and the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Spiritual directors can help people sort out emotional from spiritual movements. They can also support people in their prayer life by helping them brainstorm methods that may work better than their current practice, and by checking in regularly to see what is emerging in their prayer. Directors can help people make their inner world and outer worlds more congruent, and to see how both of these can be more congruent with God’s intention for their lives.

### An Ecumenical Ministry

Historically, most people went to spiritual directors who were part of their same faith tradition. This time-honored practice has much going for it.

For those of us for whom Anglican spirituality has been deeply meaningful, having a spiritual director who is knowledgeable about our tradition can be very helpful and reassuring.

But increasingly, people are looking for directors outside their own tradition. This began about fifteen years ago when Protestants began going to Catholic spiritual directors, and then began applying at Catholic training centers to become spiritual directors themselves. Soon it was not uncommon for a Catholic to go to a Protestant for spiritual direction. In the last ten years, this ecumenical openness has gone even further. Many Unitarians, Jews, Buddhists, and even Neo-pagans have trained as spiritual directors, and it is not uncommon for a Christian to go to a Buddhist for direction, or a Jew to a Hindu.

While this interfaith trend in the ministry does present some challenges, it can also provide some advantages. Often we are too close to our own tradition to notice its blind spots, and the distance provided by a spiritual companion from another tradition can often provide a needed corrective to the insular assumptions every spiritual tradition is burdened with.

I found this to be true in my own case, as I was searching for a new director several years ago. I was struggling with my understanding of Jesus, and did not want a Christian director, as I was afraid he or she would not understand my Christological struggles and might try to coerce me theologically into an “acceptable” and orthodox position. I know now that such doctrinal coercion is unethical, and all spiritual directors are on guard against it. But my own fears were real as well, and God tended to them by leading me to a wonderful Jewish woman who has served as my director for nearly six years now.

Spiritual directors even have an interfaith professional organization to represent and support them, Spiritual Directors International. SDI publishes a

journal, *Presence*, and offers opportunities for continuing education and networking for spiritual directors the world over.

### Finding a Spiritual Director

It is tempting to say that the ministry of spiritual direction is “not for everybody,” but it is hard to imagine someone who would not benefit from such a ministry. Spiritual directors are easy to find, and are far more affordable than people suppose. Directors generally offer a sliding scale, and while some charge anywhere from \$20–60 per session, some see it as a gift from God to the world, and offer their ministry for free.

Everyone is different, and one must simply ask around to find someone who is a good fit. It is normal to “try out” a couple of spiritual directors to find just the right person, and most spiritual directors will support you in this search.

The sidebar on the right hand side of this page lists several spiritual directors who are either Episcopalians or work closely with our Diocese. If you would like to try a director in the Anglican tradition, this is a great place to start.

The spiritual journey is not a solitary one. Having a companion on the way, a “soul friend” or spiritual director can help any of us to live out our faith in a more intentional, focused, and prayerful way than any of us can achieve on our own. After all, two heads are better than one! The ministry is “catching on” in the wider culture, and Episcopalians are very much a part of it. Is spiritual direction right for you? Only you can say, but as a spiritual director myself, I would counsel you to pray about it. ■

*John Mabry, PhD, is the managing editor of the Pacific Church News, the director of the interfaith spiritual Direction Certificate program at the Chaplaincy Institute for Arts and Interfaith Ministry, and a spiritual director in private practice in Berkeley, CA. Contact him at [jmabry@apocryphile.org](mailto:jmabry@apocryphile.org) or 510.290.4349.*

## Some Spiritual Directors in the Diocese of California

*The PCN does not endorse or “recommend” anyone on this list. Spiritual direction is not a regulated helping profession, and one must choose a spiritual director carefully. Before making a final selection, it is a good idea to ask a spiritual director where he or she did his or her training, his or her specialties, and experience.*

**Daphne Copenhagen.** Daphne is open to a variety of spiritual practices with emphasis on meditation and centering prayer. More of a spiritual companion than a director, she prefers to meet face-to-face. Contact her at 650.345.6688.

**Karla Droste.** Karla is particularly interested in accompanying those discerning their vocation in every aspect of their lives, including decisions about life direction, relationships and lifestyles, work and finance. She is committed to assisting those who wish to enhance their capacity to listen for God’s direction, especially through transitions. Phone: 510.893.2913; email: [karlad123@aol.com](mailto:karlad123@aol.com).

**Roderick Dugliss.** Roderick is a graduate of the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation Spiritual Guidance program. He has a slight apophatic bias (prayer without words or images), and much experience with issues of discernment and the distinctive needs of clergy. Contact him at [rdugliss@sfd.edu](mailto:rdugliss@sfd.edu).

**Janet Boeth Jones.** Much of her experience has been with those discerning and following calls to ordained ministry as well as those following new paths in the second half of life. Phone: 415.771.9908; email: [jboethj@juno.com](mailto:jboethj@juno.com).

**Dr. Bonita Ann Palmer MD, MFT, DASD, MDiv,** is a Jungian psychotherapist who works interfaith with artists, healers, ministers, and others. She specializes in dreamwork, guided imagery, mind/body connection, and sexuality/spirituality. Phone: 415.550.7900; email: [Bonita.Ann.Palmer@ecunet.org](mailto:Bonita.Ann.Palmer@ecunet.org).

**Rev. Dr. Bonnie Ring.** Dr. Ring helps others learn to notice how God is speaking to them: through others, significant events and experiences, dreams, body signals and their emotions, and to explore God’s messages and their own sense of call and purpose. Trained at Mercy Center Burlingame, she also is continuing to grow spiritually as a woman, a contemplative, an Episcopal Priest, and a licensed Psychologist and Psychotherapist. She serves on the boards of the Pacific Center for Spiritual Formation and the Pacifica Center for Solitude. Offices in Emeryville and Moss Beach. Phone: 650.728.0555 and 510.655.0556 (Wed-Thurs); email: [drbring@pacbell.net](mailto:drbring@pacbell.net).