



A Practice of Mentoring in Spirituality

ANNE SHAVE discusses the value spiritual direction can have in our lives.

“**W**hat is spiritual growth and how do I foster it in my life?” When we find ourselves asking this question we may appreciate being able to discuss it with someone else. We might do so in small groups, among friends, or with someone in our parish. We may not be aware that within the Church there is a long-standing tradition of support offered to those who would like to converse with another person about the spiritual life. This article is an introduction to the ministry of spiritual direction. In *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, the authors William Barry and William Connolly define

spiritual direction as “help given by one Christian to another which enables that person to pay attention to God’s personal communication to him or her, to respond to this personally communicating God, to grow in intimacy with God and to live out the consequences of the relationship.” For this article, trained spiritual directors and attendees (people who engage in spiritual direction) tell me what spiritual direction means to them. Their names are pseudonyms.

Spiritual directors usually meet with individuals on a regular basis, often over a period of months or even years. At each appointment, lasting about one hour, the director asks open-ended questions to encourage attendees to reflect prayerfully on their lives and faith. As one spiritual director, Brian,

explains, time and space is provided for attendees to “sift through what’s happening for them inside.” He adds: “What the director is helping them do is to notice, as they look back over their daily lives, notice the moments where there is an experience of God or an experience of mystery breaking into their lives.” Richard, who attended spiritual direction regularly for several years, told me that a “very basic question” of spiritual direction was: “Where is God in this stuff that’s happening here?” Richard felt “that’s a very good question.” He described his time at spiritual direction, and his reflection afterwards, as really helpful because “it’s hard to see God at times.”

Practice of Listening

Susan Phillips, a sociologist and spiritual director writes: “Talking

to another who takes an interest in our spiritual experience allows us to narrate our lives, weaving coherence and meaning as we do." For Presbyterian minister and retreat director Andrew Dunn: "There is a shortage of listening in life today, whether between spouses, parents and children or in life in general, and not least in the Church." Spiritual director Louisa agrees it can be an "utter relief" for some individuals – perhaps especially for those in helping professions or in familial situations that demand constant care of others – to be able to talk to someone who will listen attentively to them for an hour.

Reflecting on her experience of spiritual direction, Raewyn, a mother with three children, says, "To have someone just to give their time up to listen to me is just amazing." Linda, who works in a parish, explained that one difference between spiritual direction and conversations she has with close friends is that she need not be concerned about providing space for them to talk, or, as she put it, needing to be "a little bit more discerning and not coming in with your own story. In spiritual direction you've got the floor!" Spiritual director Frances observed that often people "just feel they need someone to talk through what's happening for them."

Exploring and Discovering

Many people who attend spiritual direction do so initially because they sense that there may be more to the spiritual life than they are currently experiencing. They "want to go deeper into God" and "grow in their relationship and understanding", said spiritual director Carol. Others may feel that they have reached a "stuck place" in their faith, when spiritual practices which had formerly provided nurture and nourishment no longer seem to be so helpful. Spiritual direction may be of particular value for those who find themselves at what Sandra Schneiders calls these "growing points" in the spiritual journey.

There are vast resources of prayer within the Church for people to discover. Spiritual directors may

Interested in Spiritual Direction?

- Speak to someone who attends spiritual direction and ask them about their experience.
- Look for "Spiritual Direction" or "Spiritual Directors" on diocesan websites, such as <https://chchcatholic.nz/pastoral/spiritual-direction/>
- The website of The Association of Christian Spiritual Directors in Aotearoa New Zealand www.acsd.org.nz provides a list of spiritual directors by location and gives further information about the training and responsibilities of its members.

be able to point individuals towards forms of prayer that could be helpful to them, or introduce them to spiritual frameworks, such as Ignatian spirituality, that encompass "long-tested wisdom", as spiritual director Matthew points out. Tony explains that spiritual direction provides space for tentative exploration. He told me that he sometimes suggests to directees: "Why don't you go away and try that, and let's talk about it next time?" Liz, an Anglican priest, also thinks of spiritual direction as a place where "a lot of people" can have "great fun exploring things. And I am too." Judith, who has received spiritual direction for over 20 years, describes some forms of spirituality she was introduced to as being "life-giving" for her.

Making Sense of Life

In the context of spiritual direction people may also find a safe and accepting place to talk about some of the paradoxes and hard questions of faith. Matthew accepts that the journey is hard: "Not all of life is the same, and the spiritual journey is not some smooth path, not some smooth upward incline and you just get holier and holier. There are times when you feel like the wheels

have fallen off. And it's OK. This has happened to God's people ever since the beginning." When difficult life events occur – such as relationship breakdowns, redundancy, illness or bereavement – some of our beliefs may be thrown into question. Some of us may find it difficult to talk with others about such things, and opportunities to discuss deep questions about life and faith with our minister or priest may be limited. Tony said that at spiritual direction people "can say whatever they need to say, and be really honest, and know it's held and it's confidential and someone else cares."

Susan Philips writes that spiritual directors can also "extend the gift of memory" to people experiencing disequilibrium in their faith. Speaking with someone who recalls "the ups and downs of the path we have walked, and continue to walk" can be very reassuring. At times of uncertainty or upheaval, a spiritual director can gently remind us that God has been with us in the past, is with us now, and that God's faithfulness "endures forever" (Ps 117:2).

Spiritual Directors

In New Zealand, spiritual direction training is currently offered through an ecumenical programme provided by Spiritual Growth Ministries (SGM), and through programmes grounded in Ignatian spirituality, such as Te Wairua Mahi: Forming Spiritual Directors in the Ignatian Tradition. The Association of Christian Spiritual Directors in Aotearoa New Zealand includes members from a range of denominations. Registered members receive ongoing supervision of their practice and they attend spiritual direction themselves. They agree to a code of ethics. ♀

Sculpture: *Jesus and the Woman of Samaria* at Chester Cathedral, UK.

Inscription: "Jesus said: The water that I shall give will be an inner spring always welling up for eternal life" (John 4:14).



Anne Shave's doctorate research explored the needs and experiences of New Zealand churchgoers in midlife.