



Integrating Spiritual Formation  
and Leadership Development

## Spiritual Direction

We've found that spiritual direction is a vital ministry for Protestant Evangelicals and many of our staff members are certified spiritual directors.

David Benner suggests that “the Protestant Reformers were all active in providing spiritual direction to others. Marlin Luther did most of this by means of correspondence, much like the apostle Paul fourteen centuries earlier. Ulrich Zwingli, while recommending confession of sins to God alone, urged Christians to consult other wise and mature Christians for assistance on the spiritual journey. And John Calvin, while stressing that the individual Christian's subservience should be to God alone, offered spiritual direction and proclaimed its merits.” (*Sacred Companions*, pp. 89-90.)



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### What is Spiritual Direction?

For some contemporary Christians, the phrase "spiritual direction" is a new one. It may be unclear or even a little worrisome. "Direction" sounds like someone is going to tell me what to do. "Spiritual" can sound somehow unreal or out-of-touch.

Through the centuries, there have been many varying ideas about spiritual direction. Some have focused on deep examination of the heart, others on matters of conscience or calling, others on discernment, and others, perhaps more recently, on a more therapeutic approach (*Gerald May, Care of Mind/Care of Spirit, p. 2*). All of these can be helpful windows through which spiritual direction gazes. Perhaps an easy way for me to share with you what I've come to understand spiritual direction to be in my training and experience is through some meaningful quotations:

*"...spiritual direction differs from moral guidance, psychological counseling, and the practice of confessional, preaching, or healing ministries (though having affinities with them) in that it directly assists individuals in developing and cultivating their personal relationship with God." (William A. Barry & William J. Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, p. ix).*

*"We define Christian spiritual direction, then, 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 this God, and to live out the consequences of the relationships. The focus of this type of spiritual direction is on experience, not ideas, and specifically on religious experience..." (Barry & Connolly, p. 8)*

*"...the spiritual director will be finally interested in the ultimate dimension of all this experience, namely: Where is God in all of this? Where in your life do you encounter him most powerfully? What do you think he is moving or calling you to? How would he want you to grow spiritually through the routine of your work, the conflicts and joys of your living situation, the important relationships of your life, your temptations, your feelings about yourself? How might faith, hope, and love pervade your ordinary perceptions and choices more completely? The concern of spiritual direction is not a separate realm, but the deepest dimension of every realm." (Thomas N. Hart, *The Art of Christian Listening*, p. 32-33).*



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### What is Spiritual Direction? (continued)

*"What we need to do is bring the director into contact with our real self, as best we can, and not fear to let him see what is false in our false self. Now this right away implies a relaxed, humble attitude in which we let go of ourselves and renounce our unconscious efforts to maintain a façade. We must let the director know that we really think, what we really feel, and what we really desire, even when these things are not altogether honorable. We must be quite frank about our motives insofar as we can be so. The mere effort to admit that we are not as unselfish or as zealous as we pretend to be is a great source of grace." (Thomas Merton, *Spiritual Direction and Meditation*, p. 33).*

*"John Wright, S. J....describes spiritual direction as 'an inter-personal situation, in which one person assists another to develop and come to maturity in the life of the spirit: that is, the life of faith, hope and love.' Wright... identifies faith with the directee's prayer life, hope with 'his difficulties, sufferings, disappointments and problems,' and love with 'his life in the Christian community.'" (Thomas H. Green, *The Friend of the Bridegroom*, p. 33-34).*

### Is Spiritual Direction Really for Evangelical Christians?

Though the term "spiritual direction" has not often been used in some contemporary expressions of Protestant Evangelical Christianity, Christian ministry and Christian counsel at its best has functioned in a spiritual direction mode. I sometimes use the phrase "spiritual mentoring" to describe the nature of this ministry.

Most recently, Larry Crabb has emphasized the great need for spiritual directors in our Evangelical churches and ministries.

*"Spiritual direction is an idea whose time has come. Its practice, of course, is as ancient as man. And since our Lord visited earth then returned home, the presence of His Spirit in every believer's life has only heightened both the opportunity and the importance of spiritual direction. For two thousand years tagging along in response to God's initiative in people's lives – discerning the ongoing movement of the Holy Spirit in the inner depths of the soul and opening the path to the interior world where the Spirit speaks most clearly – has been the valued work of a spiritual director, seen as essential among serious Christians." (Larry Crabb, *The Pressure's Off*, p. 41).*



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### Where Can I Read More About Spiritual Direction?

Listed below are some of the books that have been helpful in varying degrees. We do not necessarily endorse all of the theological positions affirmed or implied in these, but there are helpful insights in these readings. (They are listed in simple alphabetical order):

*William A. Barry & William J. Connolly. **The Practice of Spiritual Direction.** San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1982.*

*Francis de Sales, Jane de Chantal. **Letters of Spiritual Direction.** Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1988.*

*Thomas N. Hart. **The Art of Christian Listening.** Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1980.*

*Sue Monk Kidd. **When the Heart Waits: Spiritual Direction for Life's Sacred Questions.** San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1990.*

*Gerald May. **Addiction and Grace.** San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988.*

*Thomas Merton. **Spiritual Direction and Meditation.** Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1960.*

*F. B. Meyer. **The Secret of Guidance.** Chicago: Moody Press, n.d.*

*Eugene Peterson. **The Contemplative Pastor.** Dallas: Word Publishing, 1989.*

*Eugene Peterson. **Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration of Vocational Holiness.** Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992.*

*Dallas Willard. **Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God.** Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984, 1993, 1999.*