

# The Gift of Spiritual Direction

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One day Jesus was teaching, and Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting there. They had come from every village of Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem. And the power of the Lord was with Jesus to heal the sick. Some men came carrying a paralyzed man on a mat and tried to take him into the house to lay him before Jesus. When they could not find a way to do this because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and lowered him on his mat through the tiles into the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus (Luke 5:17–19, NIV).<sup>1</sup>

**I**t is a beautiful and life-changing gift to have a friend or companion carry us into the presence of Christ. The story of the paralyzed man in Luke 5 captures the gift of grace-filled friendships.<sup>2</sup> The story of four unnamed friends unfolds quickly without a lot of details.<sup>3</sup> We don't know if the friends were planning to carry their paralyzed companion or whether it was a spontaneous act. We don't know if the paralyzed man was willing or resistant. What we do know, is that he was lowered down from the ceiling into the presence of Jesus, and Jesus did what Jesus had done so many times; he responded with grace and power toward a person in need. It is a remarkable story of grace and hope.

Everyone needs friends who will carry them to Christ. For every person facing life's hardships or troubles, be it addiction, despair, broken relationships, or burdensome secrets, having compassionate friends who are motivated to get us close to Jesus is a welcomed gift. Central to the story, however, and of central importance to this article on the gift of spiritual

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<sup>1</sup> Scriptural references used are from the New International Version of the Bible.

<sup>2</sup> N.T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (London: SPCK, 2001), 60.

<sup>3</sup> Mk 2:3 tells us four men carried the paralyzed man.

direction, is the truth that the four people who carried their friend to Jesus were simply witnesses of grace. Their work was not healing a paralyzed man, but rather, digging a hole in the roof. Their faith, commended by Jesus, was the belief that Jesus had the insight and power to address the life and paralysis of the man on the mat.<sup>4</sup> The friends watched grace at work; they were witnesses of a miracle.

The ministry of spiritual direction parallels the story of the four friends in one central way. At its core, spiritual direction is the compassionate act of holding a directee before God and then giving witness to how God is present. Through the gift of listening and Holy Spirit attentiveness, the director becomes a witness of the movement of God's grace in the life of the directee. Spiritual directors speak often about the secondary role they play in a direction session, drawing attention to the important work of the Holy Spirit who surrounds and interacts with those who come for direction. Lucy Abbott Tucker rightly emphasizes the important distinction that spiritual directors are more like witnesses of God's work than they are helpers. She writes, "I think it is very helpful to remember that as spiritual directors we are not about helping people but rather are about being present to and privileged to witness a directee's relationship with the Sacred in this very moment."<sup>5</sup> Once the paralyzed man was before Jesus, the friends became witnesses of a sacred and holy moment.

In the summer of 2024, the C. John Weborg Center for Spiritual Direction (the Weborg Center) welcomed its twentieth cohort of students. We celebrate the twenty-year history of guiding women and men in the art and practice of spiritual direction, a profoundly beautiful and important ministry of listening in the world. The Center for Spiritual Direction, as it was then called, had its beginning in 2005 when the first cohort of students gathered to learn the art and practice of direction. Many people labored to give birth to the Center, but in a fitting ceremony at the Hyatt Regency O'Hare Hotel in July 2011, the Center was renamed in honor of C. John Weborg, who was instrumental in bringing spiritual formation perspectives and practices to North Park Theological

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<sup>4</sup> Craig A. Evans, *Luke: New International Biblical Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1990), 89. Although the central focus of the pericope is the conflict between the authority of Jesus and that of the Pharisees, Evans points out that Jesus is impressed with all the effort and trouble the friends went through to bring the paralyzed man to him.

<sup>5</sup> Lucy Abbott Tucker, *Spiritual Direction Supervision: Principles, Practices, and Storytelling* (Bellevue, WA: SDI Press, 2020), 62.

Seminary.<sup>6</sup> Since the Weborg Center's beginning, spiritual direction has been used by God to lovingly heal and transform individual lives in the Evangelical Covenant Church and beyond. We celebrate with everyone who sought out and found a spiritual director, and with each student who graduated with a certificate in direction, recognizing the beautiful and sacred gift that is opened as two people sit in a spiritual direction session together. This article will describe five ways spiritual direction is a gift to individuals and to the Evangelical Covenant Church.

## **Cultivating Awareness of God**

There are many definitions of spiritual direction, but they all share an important theological center: God is faithfully and lovingly present to each person in every dimension of life.<sup>7</sup> God is in all things, as the Ignatian phrase captures so concisely. Spiritual direction assumes God is moving toward people to bring about comfort, forgiveness, joy, healing, insight, and peace. Like the four faithful friends in the gospel story mentioned earlier, directors are given a front row seat to the work of God; they are witnesses of grace. However, discerning the presence of God and cultivating greater awareness of God are not easily accomplished. Certain conditions and postures are necessary for noticing God's fingerprints in one's life. Although discernment can be difficult, it is important to remember that the lack of awareness of God's presence doesn't shift the central theological premise of spiritual direction. Because God is always with God's people, every occasion offers us glimpses of God's nearness and can be an opportunity to encounter God. Julian of Norwich, a mystic from the 14th century, captures this beautifully:

*Take it GENERALLY, and behold the graciousness of the Lord  
God as He sheweth to thee: for it is more worship to God to  
behold Him in all than in any special thing. And therewith I*

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<sup>6</sup> Many people were involved in starting what is now the C. John Weborg Center: Richard Carlson, Paul Bramer, Helen Cepero, Ellen Kogstad, Stephen Graham, Dan Pietrzyk, Paul Koptak, David Kersten, Carol Lawson, Sally Johnson, Jay Phelan, and others.

<sup>7</sup> As an example: "Spiritual direction is the exploration of a person's spiritual path with someone trained in listening, deep reflection, and discernment." Teresa Blythe, *Spiritual Direction 101: The Basics of Spiritual Guidance* (Berkeley, CA: Apocryphile Press, 2018), 2. Or: "Spiritual Direction is the simple gift of sacred Presence offered to another providing a gentle but tenacious encouragement to open fully to God's loving Presence and to co-discern with that person God's activity in every aspect of life." Definition provided by Jeff Imbach, "What Is Spiritual Direction?" Soul Stream, 2024. <https://soulstream.org/what-is-spiritual-direction/#>.

learned that it is more worship to God to know all-thing [sic] in general, than to take pleasure in any special thing. And if I should do wisely according to this teaching, I should not only be glad for nothing in special, but I should not be greatly distressed for no manner of thing: for ALL *shall be well*. For the fulness of joy is to behold God in *all*: for by the same blessed Might, Wisdom, and Love, that He made all-thing [sic], to the same end our good Lord leadeth it continually, and thereto Himself shall bring it; and when it is time we shall see it.<sup>8</sup>

“For the fullness of joy is to behold God in all” is, I believe, Julian’s way of stating both the longing of the human heart and the goal of the Christian life: the wonderful and transforming goal of learning to be aware of God at every turn. Cultivating this awareness is anything but easy.

Life happens fast. Schedules fill up, commitments are made, tasks must be completed. At any given moment, most people in North America feel they have way too many things going on in their lives. As John Mark Comer suggests, we suffer from a hurried sickness.<sup>9</sup> Living at this frenetic pace is not conducive to cultivating attentiveness to God. Elijah’s encounter with the Lord highlights the need to be attentive to the quiet gentle whisper of God (1 Kings 19:11–13). Similarly, Psalm 46 invites the people of God to be still in order to know that God is God (Psalm 46:10). Why? Stillness is necessary to notice the subtle and gentle movements of God. Again, the psalmist describes the importance of moving toward a calmness and quietude, like a weaned child at its mother’s breast (Psalm 131:2). The message is clear: God can be known, but certain conditions are more conducive to hearing and knowing God, and a hurried life is not one of them.

It is in the context of the unfortunate cultural affirmation of hurriedness that spiritual direction can be a gift—a countercultural gift at that. The very act of setting up a one-hour appointment with a spiritual director, someone who will invite us into a sacred and unhurried time, can

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<sup>8</sup> Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love Recorded by Julian of Norwich* (Project Gutenberg, 2016), chap. XXXV, 71, [https://www.gutenberg.org/files/52958/52958-h/52958-h.htm#THE\\_THIRTEENTH\\_REVELATION](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/52958/52958-h/52958-h.htm#THE_THIRTEENTH_REVELATION). Original author’s italics.

<sup>9</sup> John Mark Comer, *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry* (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook, 2019), 19. Comer acknowledges that the phrase “ruthless elimination of hurry” comes from Dallas Willard, and the phrase “hurried sickness” comes from his mentor John Ortberg.

offer the weary soul space to linger. Lingering or loitering with a spiritual director is good for the soul because the soul needs a safe and loving space to speak its truth. Parker Palmer describes the soul's timidity this way:

The soul is like a wild animal, tough, resilient, resourceful, savvy, and self-sufficient: it knows how to survive in hard places. Yet despite its toughness, the soul is also shy. Just like a wild animal, it seeks safety in the dense underbrush, especially when other people are around. If you want to see a wild animal, we know that the last thing we should do is go crashing through the woods yelling for it to come out. But if we will walk quietly into the woods, sit patiently at the base of a tree, breathe with the earth, and fade into our surroundings, the wild creature we seek might put in an appearance. We may see it only briefly and only out of the corner of our eye, but the sight is a gift we will always treasure as an end in itself.<sup>10</sup>

Resistance to slowing down may rise quickly in the directee as she feels busyness pulsating in her veins. Given time, however, the gift of a holy sacred place and pace with a director can help the directee settle into the questions and longings her soul wants most to name and explore, matters that never get acknowledged in the rush of living life so fast.

Spiritual directors, then, play an important role in slowing life down. Directors can guide individuals to notice the movement of God in their heart through invitations to pause or savor an experience, through the invitation to sit in silence for a moment, or through a timely question. Noticing the subtle and gentle movements of God takes practice. Like weak muscles need strengthening through simple exercises, cultivating an awareness of God's presence in all of life starts simply through the act of taking time to reflect on how God is already present. Ignatian spirituality offers discernment and strengthening exercise in a spiritual practice called the Examen.

The spiritual practice of Examen was developed by Ignatius of Loyola to help monks review their day, but more important, to strengthen their awareness of God throughout the day. The movements of the prayer are rather simple but together create deeper awareness of God-given desires and feelings in one's life.<sup>11</sup> The Examen prayer begins with seeking *illu-*

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<sup>10</sup> Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 58–59.

<sup>11</sup> Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices that Transform* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 52.

mination from God as one reviews the day; then giving thanks for the gifts of the day; followed by prayerfully *reviewing* the day's various feelings and desires; next, an honest *confession* of one's failures and sins of the day; ending with a *recommitment* to live a renewed life for the day ahead. Spiritual directors offer this practice to directees knowing that the regular practice of it bears the fruit of being more "God-centered by observing the moments when we are or are not so." Directors may offer other spiritual practices, but central to their work is the invitation they offer to each directee to slow down and pay attention to the all-embracing presence of a loving God.<sup>12</sup>

## Living from the Heart

Henri Nouwen, one of the twentieth century's most well-known Christian writers, movingly writes:

Wouldn't it be good to increase God's joy by letting God find me and carry me home and celebrate my return with the angels? Wouldn't it be wonderful to make God smile by giving God the chance to find me and love me lavishly? Questions like these raise a real issue: that of my own self-concept. Can I accept that I am worth looking for? Do I believe that there is a real desire in God to simply be with me?<sup>13</sup>

Nouwen goes on to suggest many people live their lives "never fully sure that they are loved as they are."<sup>14</sup> The biblical truth about God's love is common knowledge among God's people, but it is rare to find a person who believes and lives from that center of profound love. Family of origin issues, wounds, sufferings, and other challenges can erode the knowledge that God looks upon each person with great love. Spiritual directors are fully aware of this tragedy and offer each directee a warm welcome and a confidential place in the hope of embodying a love that reflects the love of God.

Embarking on the journey toward a more expansive acceptance of being a beloved child of God can be painful. Past negative images of God or hurtful experiences in the church trap people in unhealthy pictures of God. But the tenacious love of a director, one who listens intently and

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<sup>12</sup> Marjorie J. Thompson, *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1995), 85.

<sup>13</sup> Henri J. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal: A Story of Homecoming* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1992), 107.

<sup>14</sup> Nouwen, *The Return*, 108.

points to more truthful images of God, one who points to loving and life-affirming images of God, can help dislodge a directee from the past. This movement of the heart happens in part because the core posture of spiritual direction is to lovingly open space for individuals to talk about the joys and challenges of one's relationship with God. The unconditional acceptance of a director certainly contributes to the experience of being loved, but the loving gift and skill of a director offers an experience of love itself. Reflecting on the work of direction, Cathy Hardy is convinced that love undergirds all that directors do.

As I listen to others, the listening is based on a foundation of trust in love. Love knows this person's story more than I ever will. Love undergirds this life and is attentive to things I will never understand. I am not the healer. I am not the fixer. I am not the magician. I am the one attentive, trusting that we are listening together to Love to guide the conversation, the way in which a life may unfold before us.<sup>15</sup>

More significant still is how the practice of meeting with the director can nurture a way of life centered on the heart. R. Paul Stevens writes about the three centers of Christian living: orthodoxy, orthopraxy, and orthopathy. Orthodoxy, which is the ordering of life based on right belief, has been Christianity's chief concern for much of its history. Orthopraxy is the important call to emphasize right living or right practices. This center needs little explanation. Christians are implored time and time again in Scripture to act justly, to seek mercy, and to love others. The third center of Christian living, orthopathy, is less discussed. Living from the heart or with the passions of the heart (orthopathy) is that way of Christian faith sustained by an open-hearted posture to God, others, and the world. Living from the heart is living mindful of the image of God residing in each person. Living from the heart, as mentioned earlier, is living from the beautiful truth that we are the beloved of God. Embracing orthopathic living balances orthodoxy and orthopraxy, and highlights a Christian life centered in the warmth of heart experiences of God, as much as being centered in right belief or action.<sup>16</sup> Spiritual directors work and listen at the level of the heart and invite their clients to do likewise.

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<sup>15</sup> Cathy AJ Hardy, *Walk with Me: Transformation through the Pathway of Spiritual Direction* (Victoria, BC: Friesen Press, 2020), 62–63.

<sup>16</sup> R. Paul Stevens, "Living Theologically: Toward a Theology of Christian Practice," *Themelios: An International Journal for Theological and Religious Students*, 20, no. 3 (1995): 4–8.

Living from the heart has another dimension that is often reluctantly expressed. Life rarely proceeds in a straight line; rather, it contains moments and even seasons of hardships and sufferings. The gift of spiritual direction is to welcome all of these experiences. Traumatic life events vary in duration and intensity but can be brought into the healing light of the Spirit through a conversation with a director. Spiritual direction can be the place where, maybe for the first time, someone dares to name the pain or even pray the pain of their life. This was true for Anne Richardson, a survivor of sexual trauma.

Spiritual direction and engaging in spiritual practices with God have been instrumental in changing my life. My spiritual director walked through a dark time with me. She taught me several spiritual practices that drew me into a deeper loving relationship with God.<sup>17</sup>

Additionally, in spiritual direction the director can guide appropriate moments and prayers of lament for the trauma experienced. In spiritual direction people can begin to prayerfully look at the moments when God held them in a painfully dark time. Spiritual direction, it is important to remember, is not therapy, whose primary goals include moving people toward healing and better coping skills. Nonetheless, spiritual direction can be incredibly healing as a directee receives the gift of being heard and understood, and welcomes, even if momentarily, the light of God's presence into the pain they have known. By God's grace, direction can foster living from the heart, a way of life that contemplates and welcomes God's loving presence into each beautiful or difficult moment.

## **Finding Meaning in Unique Experiences**

Spiritual directors are trained to listen deeply to all the experiences people bring to a direction session. Some of these experiences are mundane, while other experiences can be rooted in complex relationships or the challenges of work. Other times an experience is so sublime or unusual that it is difficult to describe, let alone understand. Who can we talk to about these unique experiences? When Jacob wakes from a night of wrestling with an angel he proclaims, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it." He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, this is the gate of

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<sup>17</sup> Anne Richardson, *Spiritual Direction with Survivors of Sexual Trauma* (San Diego, CA: Anne Richardson Publishing, 2023), 5.



heaven” (Genesis 28:16–17). In the Gospel of Luke, the disciples of Jesus are mystified by seeing Christ transfigured while in prayer. “While he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning” (Luke 9:29). The disciples’ response to the voice from the cloud proclaiming, “This is my son, whom I have chosen, listen to him” was to keep everything to themselves, and they kept it a secret (Luke 9:36). These mystical experiences are part of a long list of unusual divine encounters recorded in the Scriptures.

Most Christians have mystical experiences to some degree. These experiences are beyond the rational or physical. For example, a woman walking alone outdoors can be interrupted by a sense that she is not alone; she feels a palpable Presence. Or an adolescent girl awakens from a dream knowing that a word from beyond has been offered to her. What are we to make of these moments? Are these encounters normal? Christian mystics of the past highlight the normalcy of special or unique encounters with God. Jason Baxter, in his *Introduction to Christian Mysticism*, shares an example from Hildegard of Bingen.

As way of example, one of her first images, as wild as anything concocted by Picasso or Chagall, is of a mountain of iron, with one seated upon it who is so bright that Hildegard said she was blinded when she looked upon this figure with the eye of her heart. From this bright one a river of sparks flows forth and then pours out onto a figure covered in eyes who stands next to a child wearing simple garments. After describing this vision, Hildegard explains: the mountain represents the “strength and stability of the eternal Kingdom of God, which no fluctuation of mutual ability can destroy”; the bright one is the one who “rules the whole world with celestial divinity and the brilliance of unfading serenity, but is incomprehensible to human minds”; and the figure covered in eyes represents the “fear of the Lord,” which stands in God’s presence with humility and gazes on the Kingdom of God, surrounded by the clarity of a good and just intention, exercising her seal and stability among humans.<sup>18</sup>

There are even more extreme examples from other mystics, but Baxter’s

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<sup>18</sup> Jason M. Baxter, *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism: Recovering the Wildness of the Spiritual Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), 21–22.

purpose in writing is captured well by his subtitle: *Reclaiming the Wildness of the Spiritual Life*. God came to Hildegard in this vision and revealed something of God's wildness and mystery to her heart. Spiritual directors, at least those who have offered direction for a season, gently attempt to come alongside individuals who seek to make sense of these uniquely wild, maybe even crazy, experiences of God. Without judgment, directors encourage people to hold these experiences, helping them wonder, pray, listen, and discern their significance.

The nature of direction is to welcome and unpack the mystery known as God. Mystical experiences can be seen as a gateway leading to more of God, rather than something to be avoided. A wise director can help with the exploration. It should not surprise us that those who live their lives with the triune God should be wooed into the greater mystery of God. God is beyond our understanding yet chooses to reveal himself at times in mysterious ways.<sup>19</sup> One of the good gifts of meeting with a director is that mystical encounters can be examined and their meaning brought to light, even if the meaning is simply a renewed sense that one is not alone in the universe.

## Hearing God's Voice in Times of Decision

What is God's will for my life? This question emerges most often at times of transition. Whether it's navigating the shift from high school to university, from university to a first job, or from one city to another, Christians have sought to discern and respond to the will of God. Discerning the will of God, however, has been wrought with oversimplification and problems. The most significant misunderstanding is the belief that God has a single predetermined blueprint for our lives. This unfortunate line of thinking results in attempts to get God to tell us what the blueprint is. Gordon Smith explains,

In determining the will of God, the focus is on external signs and counsel that help the individual determine God's perfect plan or purpose. Those who take this approach assume that there is one and only one perfect plan for each individual and that this perfect plan can be discovered by an examination of signs, or what are often called open doors.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Celtic Christianity describes these mysterious encounters as "thin places"—places where the space between heaven and earth is thin.

<sup>20</sup> Gordon T. Smith, *Listening to God in Times of Choice: The Art of Discerning God's Will* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 16.

A better approach, one that is important to spiritual directors, is to see times of decision or transition as times to listen to the voice of God. Or as Smith says, “There is a whole stream of Christian thought that has consistently affirmed that in times of choice we can and must listen to God. God is present; God does speak; and we can, if we will, hear and respond to his prompting.”<sup>21</sup>

Spiritual direction offers God’s people a different way to discern God’s voice during times of decision.

Discernment refers to both a posture and a process. As a spiritual posture, discernment entails fostering a contemplative attitude that helps us to spot the presence of God in the concrete events and experiences of ordinary life. To live with a discerning heart is to believe, as Elizabeth Barrett Browning expressed it, that “earth’s crammed with heaven” and that God is everywhere to be found in the holy ground of our existence. As a process, discernment involves making decisions in a way that allows God to be a telling influence in our choices. The goal is to refine the acoustics of our heart so that we can better hear the Spirit’s guidance.<sup>22</sup>

Almost all spiritual directors who are trained in the historic understanding of spiritual direction are taught the way of discernment as practiced by Ignatius of Loyola. Ignatius, attempting to bring renewal to monasteries in the fifteenth century, wrote one of Christianity’s premier guides to decision making. Believing that God is present in love at every juncture of life, Ignatius wrote a clear and helpful process for listening to the voice of God. At its core, discerning the spirits, as he called it, is an intentional and thoughtful way to discern which life decision would be most in keeping with God’s desires and most in line with a life lived for the glory of God. The gift of direction during times of decision lies in the gift of having a director who can lead a directee through a discernment process.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Smith, *Listening*, 17.

<sup>22</sup> Wilke Au and Noreen Cannon Au, *The Discerning Heart: Exploring the Christian Path* (New York: Paulist Press, 2006), 19.

<sup>23</sup> Elizabeth Liebert summarizes the foundation of Ignatian discernment as: 1) Seeking your heart’s desires, 2) Remembering your personal story, 3) Embracing your role as co-creator, 4) Learning to practice spiritual indifference, 5) Affirming the call to seek more in one’s life. Having a spiritual director who can guide this process is a wonderful gift. Elizabeth Liebert, *The Way of Discernment: Spiritual Practices for Decision Making* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2008), 23.

For anyone who has felt the heaviness of making decisions alone, direction is a wonderful place of companionship in the art of decision making. For anyone who is uncertain about next steps or fearing that a wrong decision may disappoint God or others, spiritual direction offers a wise and gracious place that invites individuals into a posture of freedom and curiosity, knowing God's will is not a single blueprint to be followed, but rather is a joyful exploration of multiple ways of honoring God. This kind of decision making, offered by directors, centers the heart and mind on God and invites the directee to listen for God's voice in moments of decision.

### **Discovering New Ways to Encounter God**

As individuals grow in their faith, they open their heart to new ways of encountering God, partly because of the normal maturing process and partly because of challenging life experiences. Many faith theorists have postulated that faith is anything but static. "A point comes on the spiritual journey, however, when a healing of one's early religious experience must occur in order for wholeness to be realized."<sup>24</sup> Faith expressions and perspectives well suited for adolescence must be shed for a faith more suitable for young adulthood. Faith perspectives that were central during midlife won't necessarily be helpful in the later stages of life. This is not to suggest that every dimension of faith is up for grabs, for there are important tenets of Christian faith and life that should be retained. What is important to highlight, considering the gift of spiritual direction, is that a relationship with a wise and gracious director can be the kind of place where faith and life transitions are navigated with care and where new ways to encounter God can be explored.

Over the last several years many authors have explored the decline of church attendance and the corresponding deconstruction movement.<sup>25</sup> At the heart of this analysis lies a communal angst. Christian behavior across denominational and theological lines has been anything but exemplary, leaving many disheartened and disillusioned with Christian denominations and supposed Christian leaders. The deconstruction movement, however, is not a new thing. Each past generation had to struggle to

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<sup>24</sup> Janet O. Hagberg and Robert H. Guelich, *The Critical Journey: Stages in the Life of Faith* (Salem, WI: Sheffield Publishing, 2005), 3.

<sup>25</sup> See Brian D. McLaren, *Faith After Doubt: Why Your Faith Stopped Working and What to Do About It* (New York: St. Martin's Essentials, 2021), or Bradley Jersak, *Out of the Embers: Faith After the Great Deconstruction* (New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 2022).

find new perspectives and practices of what fidelity to Jesus Christ looks like. As stated above, spiritual direction offers a hope-filled relationship for making the transitions from one stage of faith to the next. It is in the confines of a loving and nonjudgmental relationship with a director that individuals can express frustrations, doubts, questions, and longings for something more. Spiritual directors can offer a timely word that encourages people to continue in their faith journey even when the next steps are not clear.

Our strivings after meaning and purpose, indeed, after God, have brought us to the end of ourselves and our own ability to encompass God. As we stand at the edge of these limits, we face nothing, or so it seems. But paradoxically, just at this point when we face nothing, rather than ourselves or any other elements of creation, we may come to know our creator.<sup>26</sup>

Spiritual nurturer Sandra Cronk highlights the supportive role directors play when people can't seem to find a way forward and are tempted to stop growing or believing.

Spiritual directors can also provide new perspectives on ancient spiritual practices to those feeling stuck in old patterns of relating to God. Scripture reading, prayer, and service have been the main staple of Christian practices over the years. These habits are healthy and enduring, but the gift of direction provides exposure to other spiritual practices. Most spiritual directors have spent years exploring a wide variety of spiritual practices themselves. Healthy directors attend continuing education events frequently and gather resources and ideas that support the work of offering direction to others. A directee who senses the invitation to create a more helpful way of encountering God can ask for suggestions from their spiritual director. This is normal. The options for exploration are almost limitless: welcoming prayer, silence, retreats, examen, fasting, breath prayer, fixed-hour prayer, body prayer, centering prayer, *lectio divina*, and *visio divina*. All these spiritual habits, which have as their goal to nurture connection with God, can be welcomed and practiced. Spiritual direction offers the gift of a director suggesting practices that fit the moment by tailoring the practices to the personality and experiences of the directee. What a gift it is to be on the receiving end of such

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<sup>26</sup> Sandra Cronk, *Dark Night Journey: Inward Re-patterning Toward a Life Centered in God* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Publishing, 1991), 46.

particularized soul care.

## **The Gift of Spiritual Direction in the Covenant**

Spiritual direction, as described above, has the potential to positively impact a person's sense of well-being and their experiences of God. When done regularly, the direction experience sets the directee on a path of increased awareness of God in daily life. More specifically, in the Evangelical Covenant Church, spiritual direction has contributed to clergy flourishing. In the spring of 2021, the Weborg Center conducted a survey of Covenant clergy.<sup>27</sup> The purpose of the survey was to examine the experiences of pastors in spiritual direction. Two hundred and forty-four Covenant pastors responded to the survey (57% male and 43% female) and offered helpful insight into how spiritual direction contributed to their well-being. Of the 244 pastors who took the survey, 44% were currently in direction, 43% had engaged in direction in the past, and 13% never had a director. Those in direction had been seeing a director on average for four years, often meeting monthly for their sessions. When asked about the benefits of being in direction, pastors shared that spiritual direction nurtures emotional and spiritual health, provides encouragement and strength for ministry, and offers the gift of being heard and the gift of a sacred place to talk about God. Additionally, when asked about how spiritual direction helped them navigate hard seasons in life, pastors responded by saying that direction helped them find God in their pain, provided comfort and companionship, and provided a new perspective on suffering. Last, when Covenant pastors were asked what led them into direction, many shared that it was another Covenant colleague who encouraged them to try it. Others stated that a free session of direction at one of the Covenant's yearly events offered them an opportunity, and some shared that a longing for a closer relationship with God drew them into spiritual direction. As the survey data suggests, spiritual direction is a life-giving and sustaining spiritual practice for many Covenant pastors.

As the director of the Weborg Center, I can affirm the findings of the survey. In the last two decades I have observed Covenant pastors becoming increasingly aware of and benefiting immensely from meeting with a spiritual director. This happens through the work of training spiritual directors, through the resources made available through Sustaining

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<sup>27</sup> The survey was designed in partnership with Dr. Elizabeth Gray (PhD) of North Park University and was distributed to Covenant clergy with the help of the Association of Covenant Spiritual Directors and the Covenant Ministerium.

Pastoral Excellence and Thriving in Ministry grants, and through the birth and growth of regional networks of Covenant spiritual directors. I should add, spiritual direction may not be for every Covenant pastor, but the countless stories I have heard along with the stories shared by the Association of Covenant Spiritual Directors (ACSD) lends credibility to the belief that spiritual direction functions as an important and beautiful gift in the soul care of Covenant pastors.

There is, however, important work still to do. At the Covenant Mid-winter conference in January 2024, the ACSD met to pray and talk about spiritual direction in the Covenant. Two themes emerged as important areas of focus.<sup>28</sup> First, increasing spiritual direction among Covenant laypeople needs a strategic plan. Second, ongoing advocacy and communication among and for Covenant spiritual directors of color needs attention. The acceptance and appreciation of spiritual direction among laypeople will take time. Much like the history of spiritual direction among clergy in the Covenant, which took years to cultivate, informing and educating Covenant laypeople about the gift that direction represents will require intentionality. This work will take the cooperation of many leaders and departments to get the word out and increase engagement in direction itself. Covenant pastors along with conference superintendents will need to be at the center of this effort.

Equipping and resourcing spiritual directors of color will need particular attention and strategies. D. Darrell Griffin writes,

As I move deeper into the ministry of spiritual direction, I am more confident that there is a place for African Americans at this table. Regardless of our ethnic backgrounds, each of us longs for a more conscious experience of God's presence and love. Each of us has sacred stories unfolding within us that invite our attention. Spiritual direction provides a place to notice, discern, and discover where God is present and active in our everyday lives.<sup>29</sup>

Today, there is an increasing number of spiritual directors of color

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<sup>28</sup> The unpublished minutes of the Association of Covenant Spiritual Directors (ACSD), January 25, 2024.

<sup>29</sup> D. Darrell Griffin, "The Healing Wisdom of Those Who Came Before: Discovering Spiritual Direction in the African American Context," *The Covenant Companion*, February 2010, 19.

in the Covenant and beyond.<sup>30</sup> There is excitement among Covenant spiritual directors of color as they share the work they do and as they offer direction to others in their context. Considering all the good work Covenant spiritual directors do, and in light of the growing number of individuals and pastors receiving the benefits spiritual direction offers, it is fitting to give thanks and praise to God whose love endures forever.

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<sup>30</sup> R. Neil Siler affirms this point and highlights ways that direction is increasing in African American contexts. See R. Neil Siler, “The Efficacy of Spiritual Direction in the African American Christian Community,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care*, 10, no. 2 (2017): 304–312. Additionally, Mosaic Spiritual Formation (<https://www.mosaicformation.org/>) and the Spiritual Directors of Color Network (<https://sdcnetwork.org/>) are doing good work to train directors of color. In the Covenant, Christina Burrows and Cindy Wu offer workshops for directors in intercultural agility, and the Weborg Center continues to be intentional in recruiting supervisors and instructors of color.