

The School For Deacons

A Guide to Spiritual Direction for Students

What is Spiritual Direction?

Spiritual direction is a relationship with a wise and grounded person with whom to discuss and pray about what is happening in one's life in God. How is our most intimate and profound relationship with the Holy understood, entered into, and nurtured? What happens when God seems distant, absent, unavailable? You open your soul to your spiritual director to have reflected back to you what s/he sees God doing in, with, for you. A director is a critical element in any process of discernment, but particularly discernment for Holy Orders. Once ordained, your spiritual director becomes even more important as a dose of reality and undergirding for one's life in ministry.

Spiritual Directors are sometimes called Spiritual Guides, Spiritual Advisors, or Spiritual Companions. A "confessor"--a role distinct and different from spiritual director—is a priest or bishop from whom one seeks sacramental absolution via auricular confession.

Why is it important? Why is it required?

Most simply put, you can't make the journey in an ordained leadership role alone. As a deacon you are at risk if you do not have the support and the tough questions a good spiritual director provides. You need to be clear about yourself spiritually, honestly, and candidly. You need to be as centered as you can before you can be unambiguously available as a deacon to congregants, to marginalized populations, to your own family. You need someone to whom to turn when things go superbly and when they fall apart and especially when life and ministry is an abundance of ordinariness.

Choosing a spiritual director

There are several criteria that can govern your choice of spiritual director.

Tradition. Should one's director be an Episcopalian or not? It is often recommended that clergy seek directors outside their denomination or confessional community so that all church related issues that come up can be shared without constraint.

Gender can be a factor. Will you be most open, most attentive, most receptive to a person of your own or the opposite gender? Only you can answer this. Notice what feelings and issues come up as you ponder your answer.

Lay or ordained? Spiritual direction is not the exclusive purview of the clergy by any means. It is a gift, a vocation distinct in itself. Across denominations spiritual direction has been recognized as a gift of many lay folk and not the gift of all clergy. What would work best for you? A lay person or an ordained person?

Convenience is important. Even the most ideal person cannot function if the process of meeting together is significantly burdensome.

Must Haves

Training. A spiritual director must have some intentional training and spiritual formation as a director. There are a number of programs locally and across the country. A director should be a product of one of them. Ordination does not automatically confer the gifts of spiritual direction. Some ordained folk have this gift. Many do not. Unfortunately, some of those think they do.

Supervision. Your director must be in direction him/herself and/or in frequent peer supervision. Without this accountability, a director can be unhelpful, even harmful.

Identity. A spiritual director is a spiritual director. A therapist is a therapist. They are two completely different roles, disciplines, and focuses. There are some skilled persons who can do both and keep the lines clear. *Caveat emptor.* These days a number of therapists tack on 'spiritual direction' as an additional "service" without the proper training etc.

Must Avoid

Your rector cannot be your spiritual director. Your director should not be from your parish of origin or your parish of ministry. Your therapist, even if s/he is a competent and trained spiritual director should not also be your director.

A faculty or staff member at the School For Deacons should not be your spiritual director. It creates a potentially difficult dual role situation.

A family member, close personal friend, employer, employee, or congregant cannot be your spiritual director. [You are likely to develop a spiritual friendship with a director, but to seek direction from someone with too much shared history or/and where there are obvious or not so obvious boundaries is not a good idea.]

How to Proceed?

Get some names. The School For Deacons has a short list of possibilities. Network with friends, colleagues, clergy—folk whose spiritual instincts you trust to get their recommendations.

Interview some prospects. Ask, first of all, if the person is still doing direction [some folk linger on lists after they have ceased to function as directors] and if they are willing to consider taking on a new person. [If they say "no", ask them for any referrals.] Then ask for an initial meeting to explore the possibility.

Ask and listen. Find out what you need to know about their background, experience, and approach. They should ask you what you are looking for in spiritual direction. Notice what else they ask.

Fee. You need to ask if the person charges a fee or not, and know what you can afford to pay, if anything

You are looking for someone you can trust and someone who will be a "fit" for you. It's OK to say that you don't think this would work for you, and continue until you find your director.

Give it a Try. Once you agree to begin a relationship, agree up front that there will be a mutual evaluation of how it's working after three or so meetings, and then periodically (at least annually) after that.