



-- Liz Ellman

Sharing the journey of spirit

More people turn to spiritual direction as a spur to growth

By KRIS BERGGREN

The ancient practice of spiritual companionship -- perhaps first modeled by the fourth-century desert mothers and fathers -- is new again as a growing number of Catholics and other believers are seeking spiritual directors to help them grow in faith. Some seekers live outwardly successful lives but feel something is missing, say spiritual directors. Others seek to put a faith spin on a traumatic event such as divorce or job loss. Yet others in transition such as midlife want to shed old skins that may not fit the next phase.

“It’s a growing ministry because churches are often not able to answer the hunger in their congregations. Formerly, homilies and missions, confessions and the presence of a pastor were able to fulfill spiritual needs of parishioners. Now, many parishes are combined and there are fewer personnel,” said Benedictine Sr Josue Behnen, who works at the Spirituality Center at St. Benedict’s Monastery in St. Joseph, Minn.

“I think the loss of credibility of a variety of institutions, including the church, as well as a different understanding of God since Vatican II -- that is, God as having a deep personal love for each one of us -- and the uncertainty of the time are drawing people into an inner well to find their stability, to find their core relationship with God and what God desires of them,” said Kathryn King of the Franciscan Sisters of Peace, a spiritual director on staff at St. Ignatius Loyola Parish on Manhattan’s Upper East Side in New York.

Evidence for growing interest includes the 300 training programs for spiritual directors, from two-week enrichment seminars to full-blown 36-credit graduate programs, said Liz Budd Ellmann, executive director of Spiritual Directors International in Bellevue, Wash., which has about 5,000 members and receives 500 e-mails a week requesting referrals to spiritual directors; they’re funneled to 120 regional coordinators worldwide, who connect seekers with local resources.

What spiritual direction is

In a nutshell, spiritual direction generally works like this: A seeker (that’s you or I in search of deeper meaning in our ordinary lives) meets regularly with a director (someone gifted with the charism of spiritual direction -- or spiritual companionship, as many in the ministry prefer -- and usually trained in disciplines such as theology, spiritual traditions and basic psychology) for conversation about whatever the seeker wants to address in the context of faith. Though there are similarities to psychological counseling, spiritual direction is not another form of talk therapy.

“Therapy,” said spiritual director Terry Shaughnessy of Loyola Spirituality Center in St. Paul, Minn., “is more about dealing with issues, problems, even pathologies that need to be resolved. Spiritual direction is really attending to the mystery of that [issue]: How does God interact with you in that struggle or question? I think they complement one another.”

A chorus of spiritual directors agrees they don’t actually “direct” or tell the seeker what to do. “Spiritual direction is sharing sacred stories and honoring them. Spiritual directors don’t fix problems. We listen with compassion,” said Jim Nepl, a spiritual director in St. Cloud, Minn.

Paula Sullivan, a Tulsa, Okla., spiritual director, considers herself a “conduit. Just someone available to listen carefully to the person and listen for what the Holy Spirit guides me to say. If the Holy Spirit doesn’t guide, I am quiet.”

Spiritual director Pegge Bernecker of Denver calls her approach “soul-friending, where I just nestle up to the spirit and pay attention.”

Rooted in the ancient experience and teachings of the desert mystics and powerhouse saints like Ignatius, Benedict, Teresa of Avila and others, spiritual direction is hardly the “flavor of the day” panacea for our neuroses or cultural boredom, says Ms. Ellmann, a former Wall Street trader who discovered the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius, converted to Catholicism and eventually became a spiritual director. “If we believe what our faith teaches us, we will be restless until we rest in God,” she said. “We may experiment with drugs or alcohol, run the marathon, [accumulate] belongings, etc., trying to satiate a hunger, but [these] can be a passing fad until someone discovers God’s love and presence. A spiritual director is someone who encourages us to live into the peace only God can give us. It is countercultural for sure.”

Looking for God

Kim Ort, 49, of Indianapolis has met with spiritual director Franciscan Sr. Marj English for three years. After participating in a parish retreat program, and reading and praying on her own, Ms. Ort began to consider spiritual direction “as a way of discerning God’s will,” particularly about her creative work in photography.

Ms. Ort, a mother of three, eventually exhibited a series of photo panels with scripture quotes on the theme “God is Light” at a Methodist church’s art gallery, and created a part-time job as a videographer at Peace Learning Center where she’d been volunteering. Lately she’s raised “all kinds of other things, family issues, friend issues” in her conversations with English. Ms. Ort feels she is making spiritual progress in tending to her midlife issues but says her growth is a constant journey. Spiritual direction has helped “in peeling away some of the layers that maybe weren’t really me,” she said. “A need to be successful, for example, to appear to have everything under control. I have been working hard at letting go and trusting God, and taking the bad with the good. At this point I am becoming more the person I am meant to be.”

Spiritual directors also offer suggestions, especially about prayer. Ms. Sullivan says a good spiritual director will have a toolbox of prayer techniques to offer seekers, which may include stimulating the imagination through journaling, drawing or scripture-based exercises, and more “emptying” contemplative methods of centering prayer, meditation and focus on breath and posture.

“People who come to spiritual direction are looking for more than the doctrines of the church. They are here for a felt sense of God,” said Ms. Sullivan.

Linda Pitcher, 41, a parish secretary in Indianapolis, says spiritual direction has helped her to arrive at that tangible sense of God. After two lonely and painful years of slogging through the aftermath of a divorce -- following 13 years of marriage, her husband told her he was gay -- she finally sought both counseling and spiritual direction. She’s slowly recovering her sense of joy in life, though still discerning what the unwanted change means in her life. She’s also learned to pray in new ways, including spending quiet time in the Blessed Sacrament chapel at her church.

“I just sit and try to be as quiet as possible,” Ms. Pitcher explained. “I don’t have a rosary, a Bible, a prayer book. I get a lot of comfort out of just being in the presence of Jesus, knowing that even though I may have made a lot of mistakes and I am not perfect, that he still loves me. It is one thing to know it intellectually but another to feel it in your heart.”

Spiritual directors believe the laity’s commitment to spiritual direction as a means of incorporating Gospel values into their daily work and home lives is a hopeful sign for the future of both society and church.

Significant changes

“People [in spiritual direction] tend to appropriate their faith on a more adult level,” said Dr Janet K. Ruffing, a Mercy Sister who directs Fordham University’s graduate program in spirituality and spiritual direction. “They become more

individuated, more fully themselves, more available for God to work through them as loving, caring people in the world.”

Sr. King finds it “thrilling” when people make significant changes as a result of their spiritual evolution: One successful businessman became a hospital chaplain. A woman left the corporate world to do development work for a nonprofit serving the poor in Latin America; another started a service program for teens at her parish. But most of us, Sr. King says, will experience the fruits of spiritual growth in subtler ways: “It may come as a challenge to be a voice for truth and goodness in the settings I am already in.

“The experience of spiritual direction and the growth that comes from it is forming the foundation at a deep level for lay ministry in the church. And it is coming organically out of the movement of the spirit, not a program somebody decided to set in place,” said Sr. King. In other words, the surge in spiritual direction seems to be fueling the fire of healthy and holy change.

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