Making the most of Spiritual Accompaniment

In recent times there has been a problem about the term spiritual director because it sounds rather directive and thus belies the nature of the directors' role. It is common today to refer to 'spiritual guidance' or more often, 'spiritual accompaniment.' *Spiritual Accompaniment* is the term that we use at the Ignatian Spirituality Centre (ISC) for what is commonly known as Spiritual Direction. However, in this document we will still use the term *director* and *directee* for clarity in who we are referring to.

Over the years there have been many courses and books written about the formation of spiritual directors; however, it is more difficult to find material on *receiving* spiritual accompaniment. It is taken for granted that a person can go along to a director in the belief that the director has an agenda or plan that will carry the meeting along. In this way the whole burden of the session is put on the director. All that the one receiving accompaniment has to do is 'turn up' at the right place at the right time and all will be well. But spiritual accompaniment in the tradition of St Ignatius of Loyola, who wrote the Spiritual Exercises, doesn't 'work' in this way.

How long has it been around, and what exactly is spiritual accompaniment and how does it work?

Spiritual accompaniment has been part of the Christian tradition since earliest times. The desert fathers and mothers were convinced of the value of having a spiritual guide or companion with whom to share their experience of the ways in which the Lord had been dealing with them. Likewise, the early Celtic Christians valued the practice so much that they sometimes travelled great distances over land and sea to meet with their director, known as their *Soul Friend* (Anam Cara). Meetings with directors would take place at regular intervals, and not only when there was a 'problem'.

The prime mover in any accompaniment session is not the director, but God, and, after God, the one receiving spiritual accompaniment. The director's role, therefore, is constantly to invite the directee to let God shed light on what they are presenting. From this it is clear that the way in which the session moves will depend on what the directee brings to it. If nothing is presented, there is not much the director can say, though she or he may well feel forced to make an attempt. *It is important, therefore, that the one seeking accompaniment should prepare for the meeting.* While it is true that the accompaniment session is an interaction between God and the person being accompanied with the assistance of the director, the groundwork needs to be there. Like gardening, seed put into prepared ground is more likely to germinate than if cast into the wind.

Spiritual accompaniment is not problem-based, though problems may be part of a person's spiritual journey. Rather, it is faith-based. This does not mean that it deals only with 'religious' topics, but it assumes that those seeking accompaniment will have some sense of their lives being an expression of their relationship with God. The promotion of that relationship, in whatever way is appropriate, is the business of spiritual accompaniment, and the director does this by encouraging the directee to recount their reflections on their life and prayer. Many will agree that to do this frequently opens up possibilities that may not have appeared at the time.

Your experience may involve speaking about your prayer life, or your spiritual life in general, or your relationships, or any other aspect of what has occurred in your life since your last meeting, and how these events have affected you and your relationship with God. Aspects of your relationship with God may have been illuminated or questioned by something you have read, and that also could form part of what you bring to the meeting with your director. It may well be that the session starts in prayer - becoming aware of how God is regarding you at this very moment. The way you imagine that God regards you will normally indicate how you regard God.

It will become obvious from this that spiritual accompaniment is not simply a chat between director and directee. *God is involved* and, therefore, it can be an experience of God at work in both director and directee during the session itself.

Preparing for spiritual accompaniment

There are three main elements of ongoing preparation for spiritual accompaniment:

1. *prayer*
2. *reflection*
3. *keeping a record.*

Prayer is one of the main means of connection between God and individuals: it is an expression of our relationship with God. Therefore, being aware of what is happening in our prayer will be a valuable source of information about our

spiritual health. Our prayer will also be a main indicator of how we are reacting to the events of our ordinary lives. *And so, it is important that we do not simply pray, but that we keep a record of what we pray and what happened as we prayed.*

Perhaps in prayer, perhaps at other times, we may reflect on various 'happenings' in our lives: relationships, conversations, quarrels, attitudes, beatitudes and so on. As a means to this end, we could use the *Examen (*also known as the *Prayer of Awareness)*. This prayer invites us, before going to bed each night, to look back over the events of the day, especially to identify what we have received and for which we can be grateful.

Unless we have exceptionally good memories, it will be useful to make notes of events, thoughts and feelings from our prayer. This will enable us to have a definite idea of what we want to talk about when we next meet with our director. A perusal of these notes will help us to see if there are patterns in what we have experienced and observed. This will form a basis of what we bring to our meeting. *Therefore, we advise that prior to an accompaniment session you read through your notes to see it there are particular points of significance which would then be the starting points of the session.* Of course, if the Holy Spirit is involved, the session might diverge into other channels!

Spiritual accompaniment is a valuable part of our Christian heritage. It can be used to great benefit or squandered, depending on how we approach it and prepare for it.

The spiritual director

The director is not there to give advice or tell you what you ought to feel or how you ought to proceed or what you ought to believe. Rather, the director is there to *listen carefully* to what you recount, to echo back relevant parts of it, and perhaps ask for explanation or further comment on things that have been said. In this way the director acts as a 'sounding board' for whatever you bring to the accompaniment session, and helps you discern what is life-giving and what is not.

Sometimes the director will suggest things to reflect on, or Scripture to read or pray with, but whatever it is, its sole purpose will be to help you reflect further on your life and attitudes. If you are trying to make an important decision, the director may suggest helpful ways of proceeding, without trying to influence the decision in any way, since the decision is yours, not the directors.

Confidentiality and safeguarding

Spiritual accompaniment is confidential, and directees are welcome to speak about experiences of abuse in a safe and supportive space. Directors do not need to report that someone has experienced abuse in the past. However, if a directee names a person who has abused a child or at-risk adult, or the place where abuse occurred (for example, a school or institution), directors are required to report this to the police or the relevant safeguarding authorities. This is because we have a responsibility to protect anyone who may currently be at risk from the person named. If you are not ready for anything to be reported, please do not name the person or place. You are welcome to ask your director at any point what confidentiality means in practice before deciding what to share.

In the director's own supervision some things shared may also be brought up with their supervisor, however the anonymity of all directees is safeguarded.

Offerings

It is usual for the person receiving spiritual accompaniment to offer something to the director for this service.

Some directors rely on the income generated by this work; others have other sources of income. As a guideline £30 or £35 for an hour's session is considered normal. Many directors are happy to take whatever the directee can afford to offer. Finance should never be an obstacle – there is bursary funding available if needed.



Clergy and others engaged in pastoral work may be able to charge the spiritual accompaniment offering as a cost of professional development in their parish or other work agency.