

A companion on the journey of faith

Spiritual direction explores God's presence

By ZOE RYAN

At certain times in life, sometimes praying just doesn't do it for some people. They may be going through a change or transition and need some clarity in their spiritual life. Sometimes they are looking for a way to deepen their relationship with God. When people feel a hunger in their spiritual life, some choose to find a spiritual director.

Spiritual direction "explores God's presence in the ordinary activities of daily life," said Barb Kruse and Linda Kerrigan, co-directors of the spiritual direction preparation program of the Franciscan Spirituality Center in La Crosse, Wis.

"You reflect on the mysteries of your life experiences and deepen your personal relationship with God." Kruse and Kerrigan have been training directors through their three-year intensive training program since 1985. The Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration sponsor the center.

Spiritual direction, found in a multitude of religions, is a process of unfolding. In a joint email to *NCR*, Kruse and Kerrigan likened it to "a kind of crockpot process in a microwave world."

To put it simply, a spiritual director walks "with another to facilitate growth in his/her relationship with spirituality for them. For a Christian, this is usually God or Jesus," said Josephine Ludwig, a spiritual director in western Missouri.

Spiritual direction is found inside the Catholic church and in other religious denominations.

"It's a time-honored practice of compassionate, non-judging, redemptive listening to another in a safe setting where what is shared is held with reverence and confidentiality," Kruse and Kerrigan said.



Eileen Flanagan teaches a course for Neumann University's graduate certification program in spiritual direction. (Photo: Neumann University/Stephanie Horst)

The Holy Spirit is the true director — the spiritual director is just the companion of the directee on this journey, they said.

All sorts of people arrive at the decision to seek a spiritual director for all sorts of reasons. Once the directee meets with a spiritual director, conversations in sessions can be about anything the directee wants: sorrows, joys, crises in faith, the everyday sacred, the experience of God or lack thereof.

Some look to deepen their relationship with God or see how that relationship impacts their relationships with others. The job of a director is to assist the directee to grow in his or her own ability to discern the spirit's direction, said Eileen Flanagan, a professor of spirituality and religious studies who oversees the graduate certificate pro-

grams in spiritual direction and spiritual direction supervision at Neumann University, Aston, Pa.

Spiritual direction is not counseling or therapy. It's not about advice-giving, problem-solving or fixing, Kruse and Kerrigan said.

Often, they said, people seek a spiritual director during certain life periods: when they need compassionate and nonjudgmental listening that is confidential; experience life changes or transitions; are seeking God, self-acceptance, wholeness, meaning; find that their traditional religious beliefs no longer fit with their experience of life; or find there is a void or deep longing in their life.

The key to a spiritual direction relationship is that both director and directee have to be absolutely free: free to say anything and free not to, said Flanagan, who helped

start Neumann's spiritual direction program in 1990. The freedom to say anything makes confidentiality vital.

Pray. That's what Flanagan says is the first thing to do when looking for a spiritual director: Pray that the right person for you at this time in your life will surface.

Then, consider some factors about a spiritual director when choosing one: age, gender, religion, marital status, clergy/religious/lay status, gender, knowledge of theology, a specific spirituality background (Franciscan, Jesuit, etc.), proximity, and life experience (whether you are looking for someone who is experienced directing people who are coping with grief and dying, addiction, etc.).

Some people need a director of the same religious track. Some people choose to go to a director out of their religious denomination. An advantage of that is they might ask you questions about your faith (due to their unfamiliarity) that make you articulate your beliefs, which in turn makes you stronger in what your faith and beliefs are, Flanagan said.

You may want to look for someone who does not live nearby you or does not share social circles with you. Fresh eyes and ears are best, and dual relationships can get tricky, said Ludwig, who has been a spiritual director since 2005.

Decide if you want to have one-on-one direction or be in a group, and then see what's available in your area. Some people prefer one or the other; in a few cases, it's both.

"They are very different dynamics and therefore feed different parts of a person's spirit. For example, during Advent you might really enjoy the reflection and interaction with a group as well as the one-on-one relationship," Ludwig said.

There is not an authorized professional accrediting organization (a current debate in the field is if there should be one), Flanagan said, so there's not really such a thing as a "certified spiritual director." Although there is no certification, there are guidelines for ethical conduct that programs can follow (available on the Spiritual Directors International website) and programs issue a certificate of completion.

"It is important that people train and it is important that people have supervision, that we really need to be accountable if we're going to be beside somebody else in this very important aspect of their whole life," Flanagan said.

Directors agreed that it's important to have a good fit with the spiritual director you choose. They advise interviewing at least a few people. Find out who you are most comfortable with, and one whose schedule meets up with yours.

You don't know this person, so get to know them, Flanagan said. Call them on the phone or set up a meeting. Get to know their understanding of faith development and their interpretation of Scripture. Feel free to notify your candidates that you are looking at other possible directors.

Once you find your director, see if that director is accepting new directees. If so, make an appointment and give the relationship a test period. Ludwig said that could be six weeks, six months — there's no precise time. Re-evaluate the comfort fit of the relationship for both director and directee.

The director also has to discern if the relationship can work. He or she might consult with his or her supervisor for this. A supervisor is for consultation and supervision, but spiritual directors also have a separate person who is their own spiritual director.

Payment for a spiritual director varies, but many use a sliding scale.

Lengths of direction also vary. Both Kruse and Kerrigan have had people come to them for spiritual direction sometimes only once or twice, and some several years or more. "We have heard of people being in regular monthly direction for 20 years or more," they said. "Some stay with the same director and others change directors over time. Sometimes a [spiritual direction] relationship abruptly ends for no apparent reason. Other times, the ending of the relationship may be a mutual parting of ways."

"Many people choose a specific Spiritual Director because it feels right. After a visit or two they feel connected, they

feel that they have been heard, they may feel more at peace, more connected to God, more energized after a visit together; life may take on a different kind of clarity. It's different for everyone."

[Zoe Ryan is an NCR staff writer. Her email address is zryan@ncronline.org.]

RESOURCES FOR SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

For more information when seeking a spiritual director:

- Spiritual Directors International's website (sdiworld.org) contains many resources and has a listing of spiritual directors by geographic area.

- Check out local retreat and spirituality centers. If they do not have directors available, ask for recommendations.

- Ask your local schools of theology, parish priests or women religious.

- Spiritual director Josephine Ludwig recommended the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation (www.shalem.org), as another good resource.

Eileen Flanagan, professor of spirituality and religious studies at Neumann University, recommended the following books and articles:

- *Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction* by Margaret Guenther;

- *Spiritual Direction: Beyond the Beginnings* by Janet Ruffing;

- *Trustworthy Connections: Interpersonal Issues in Spiritual Direction* by Anne Winchell Silver;

- "Is spiritual direction for you?" by Kathleen Fischer, *Liguorian* magazine, November 2006;

- "What to expect in Christian spiritual direction" by Thomas Hart, *Presence*, Vol. 13, No. 1;

- "Holy listening: The spiritual direction movement" by Amy Frykholm, *The Christian Century*, Dec. 27, 2011.

—Zoe Ryan