

What is Spiritual Direction?

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SD is an ancient practice of a spiritual director accompanying you in your spiritual journey. Three words, I think, characterise the SD encounter.

Hospitality

SD is built upon *imago Dei*—whatever your story, as someone created in God’s image, you are precious and your journey will be honoured. Therefore, hospitality—the creation of space to both be and become—is foundational. In this ‘grace space’, in being deeply present to you, your director seeks to ‘listen into speech’ the real stuff of your life—joys, hopes, prayers, griefs, weariness, questions, worries, work, play, relationships, failures, and so on—without you fearing judgement or being told what to do. This fosters the movement towards spiritual authenticity.

Discernment

SD is built upon *missio Dei*—there are no ‘no go’ zones for the incarnate and redemptive God, who in Jesus has entered into human experience and is thus already present and at work in yours. Therefore, discernment is less about future-orientated, outcome-focused decisions, and more about a journey in contemplative, slow and deep listening and responding to that Presence. In SD we often say that we live our lives forwards, but understand them backwards. Hence, as you tell your story, together you and your director ponder significant points of connection and divine movements in your life. This fosters the movement towards spiritual insight.

EnCOURAGEment

SD is built upon the ministry of the Spirit, the True Encourager—we need God’s animating life to respond. Therefore, in light of what has been discerned together, your director offers the gift of courage to faithfully live out your life in God. A director will hold you prayerfully as you re-engage with what you are being called to, whether that is incremental or monumental. This fosters the movement towards spiritual engagement in your world, your reality.

What isn’t SD?

Therapy

SD isn’t pastoral or clinical counselling, or psychotherapy. Directors know this, and refer as appropriate. SD isn’t focused on working towards solutions to problems, but on the ways problems offer potential sources for spiritual maturity, self-discovery, trust in God, and possible transformation. It is your relationship with God *in the midst* of issues, rather than working *through* them, that is at the heart of SD. The ‘problem’ that SD seeks to address—if there is one—is that you are not as attentive and responsive to God’s presence and activity in daily life as you might be. This means you and your director try to let go of trying to ‘achieve’ something in a session; accompanying presence and attentiveness to the Holy Spirit, through deep listening, *is* the point.

Advice

SD isn't about your director giving guidance or telling you what you ought to do, despite what the name might suggest. Your director might suggest a Scripture or encourage a different way of praying, but you are encouraged to hold this loosely as part of your discernment process. In this sense, 'spiritual director' is really a misnomer, for it is the Holy Spirit who directs as you and your director listen together. That's why some prefer different titles for this ministry, such as 'spiritual mentoring', 'spiritual companioning' or 'spiritual friendship'. We have chosen to retain 'spiritual direction' since it is widely recognised.

Mutual

SD isn't mutual. That's not to say your director won't share something of their own life or be blessed/challenged/touched themselves. But the focus of SD is you, and through their training directors will be aware of this 'imbalance'. Thus it is usually best if SD is the only context for your relationship with your director.

What might a directee and director talk about?

SD is concerned with *what is*—actual life—rather than what *we think* our lives ought to be. I love the poem *Start Close In* by David Whyte; here are the first two stanzas:

*Start close in,
don't take the second step
or the third,
start with the first thing
close in,
the step
you don't want to take.*

*Start with
the ground
you know,
the pale ground
beneath your feet,
your own
way of starting
the conversation.*

David Whyte, *River Flow: New & Selected Poems*, Revised edition. (Langley, WA: Many Rivers Press, 2012), 212.

SD begins with this ground we know, this pale ground beneath our feet. Sometimes you might struggle to imagine God at work in your quite 'ordinary' life. Sometimes it's *hard* to take that first step towards sharing what's really happening for you; it's the step you don't want to take. But SD takes a radical punt on the grace of God, assuming Divine Presence might be found in *this* circumstance, in *this* pain, in *this* reality. So human experience is the raw data for SD. You choose what to reflect on each time. It could be something overtly 'spiritual'—a moving prayer time, an encounter with God in nature or the Scriptures, an 'aha!' moment through circumstances. Equally, though, it could look quite 'normal'—the 'one step at a time' plodding through ordinary life and all its ups and downs, with God quietly at your side. So although the focus is your relationship with God, together you and your director assume that God is present in all things. It's not just about your 'prayer life'; *all* is grist for the mill in SD.

Who can come for SD?

Anyone who has a hunger for reflecting upon their experience of God/the Divine/the Sacred, exploring deeper questions of meaning, or furthering their spiritual journey—whether they express this with religious vocabulary or otherwise—may find spiritual direction helpful. Those who are called to public ministry roles may find SD particularly helpful in attending to the soul of their leadership amidst the crucible of ministry.

What else?

Meeting details will be decided upon together, but typically sessions are an hour long every 4-6 weeks. Directors and directees may be of the same or opposite gender. SD relationships are reviewed regularly, and can be short term or last for many years. Often, though not always, directors will receive a fee for their time. SD is not a ministry that can be turned on and off like a tap. Directors themselves, therefore, will have undergone training and formation; meet regularly with their own director; will be committed to their own ongoing formation in contemplative prayer and living; and will engage in regular group or one-to-one supervision as part of their ongoing development and accountability. They will make explicit with their directee their adherence to a code of ethics, including issues surrounding confidentiality and appropriate boundaries.

How Do I Find a Spiritual Director?

Good question! Sometimes it isn't straightforward and it takes time, patience and prayer, but there are a few avenues:

- Contact me at bruce.hulme@outlook.com and we can explore possibilities
- Search the websites of local and national bodies for spiritual director's directories, e.g., Ecumenical Spiritual Directors Association of SA (<https://esda.org.au/>), Australian Network for Spiritual Direction (<https://ansd.org.au/>)
- Spirituality centres, e.g.,
<https://www.ignatianheartspirituality.com/>,
<https://jisa.org.au/sa-sevenhill/>
- Spiritual Direction programs

