

Would Group Spiritual Direction Work at St Luke?

by Jerry Aaker

Several years ago, I took a training course in Group Spiritual Direction through the Shalem Center for Spiritual Formation in Baltimore where I had the privilege of studying with Sister Rose Mary Dougherty, author of the book *Group Spiritual Direction: Community for Discernment*. That book set the standard and model for Group Spiritual Direction used by other practitioners of the art since its publication. Spiritual Direction is historically done on a one-on-one basis, and is well known in the Roman Catholic church, where most priests and other religious are required to have a spiritual director. It is only in the last few decades that it has started to be more widely practiced in other denominations, and has been opened up for lay people as well as clergy. Most Spiritual Directors come from Catholic and Episcopal church backgrounds, though there are some in Lutheran circles, as well. Group direction is quite new.

As a result of my experience with Shelem, I have facilitated individual and group spiritual direction with both lay people and clergy in various settings. I have found that group spiritual direction is a safe and confidential space where people can talk about their relationship with God and where we honestly share our spiritual journeys with each other.

We are talking about very small groups here; minimum of three and no more than five. However, we can look for flexibility and find ways to accommodate more people, if more are interested. The time and place of meetings would be determined in discussion with those interested in forming a group or groups. Commitment to staying with the group for at least six months would be needed.

Sister Rose Mary wrote: Group spiritual direction is a process where people meet together on a regular basis to help one another cultivate their relationship with God in the midst of the reality of their lives.

Members must agree to:

- commit themselves to an honest relationship with God
- to participate wholeheartedly in the group process through prayerful listening and response
- to open their spiritual journeys for consideration by others

The following is an excellent article by Alice Fryling, describing the what, how and why of group spiritual direction. However, this might not necessarily be the exact model we would use at St Luke. We might need to free up time and space amidst St Luke's other programs and offerings to make this happen, but it certainly should be seen as a

compliment, not a competition, to what is happening in the other faith formation endeavors already happening.

ARTICLE

What Happens in Group Spiritual Direction?

A small group of people meet together to provide spiritual direction for each other. Members of the group are given the opportunity, one at a time, to be the directee, and the group responds prayerfully to whatever the directee chooses to present.



The format is simple. The group starts with a time of silence or a short meditation. After that the group invites one person to talk for five or ten minutes about whatever they'd like. Then there is another time of prayerful silence. Out of the silence, the group begins to ask questions, responding to whatever the directee is presenting. At the close of the person's presentation and the group's response, there is another time of prayerful silence during which each person in the group prays silently for the individual who presented. The group may choose to allow time for two people to present in one session, but in any case, over the course of several months, everyone will have the opportunity to be the directee.

The purpose of these groups is not counseling or therapy. Nor are they intended to be places where we can engage in aimless, self-absorbed conversations. The purpose of spiritual direction groups is *formation*. Spiritual formation is "a process of being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others." The intentional goal of group spiritual direction is to help each participant become more aware of God in their lives, *for the sake of others*. In other words, it leads to an awakening of the soul. This awakening then leads to a life that is purposeful and intentional. Group spiritual direction helps individuals grow in their faith, love others more fully, and participate in the mission of the church more effectively.

Leadership of the Group

A group like this—which invites people to share their own spiritual journeys, be personal and authentic, and seek transformation for the sake of others—is very unusual. You won't hear the average after-dinner conversation when they meet. For this reason, spiritual direction groups need informed facilitators to lead, ideally people who have been trained as spiritual directors.

This, however, is not always possible. Spiritual direction is a ministry that's just being rediscovered in the Protestant church. Most churches don't have people who have already been through spiritual direction training programs. Yet people are seeing the benefits of spiritual direction and looking for ways to engage in the experience. When this is the case, group spiritual direction can be especially valuable, and it can be

effective even without a trained spiritual director. One way to begin is to have a study group about spiritual direction so that everyone understands how unique, and yet how familiar, spiritual direction can be.

Whether you have a trained spiritual director in your church or not, what is essential is for each individual in the group to be committed to the spiritual direction process, and for someone who has proven skills in group leadership to be given the responsibility to facilitate the group process.

After the facilitator guides the group through the time of silence, he or she invites the assigned presenter to share from their life. Sometimes this means that the facilitator needs to encourage the presenter with a few open questions. Other times the facilitator needs to gently keep the presenter on track and within the time frame. The facilitator also needs to provide leadership for the group in their response, encouraging questions and discouraging advice. The job of facilitating group spiritual direction is not an easy one, but if the group shares the leader's commitment to the process, it works well.

In some groups, the facilitator also takes a turn as presenter. When that happens, he or she asks someone else to facilitate that session. In other groups, the facilitator is there only as a director and does not take a turn as directee. This is usually the case when the facilitator is a trained spiritual director.

The Essentials

Several ingredients are essential for group spiritual direction. Absolute confidentiality is on the top of the list. The group will be a place where personal soul-work happens. This kind of intimacy requires the confidence that nothing shared in the group will be shared outside the group. It is a good idea to reiterate the group's commitment to confidentiality from time to time.

Regular attendance is another essential ingredient. Group members need to commit to coming to each meeting if at all possible. Sporadic attendance is not an option if the group is to establish the trust and camaraderie necessary for authentic personal sharing.

It's also a good idea to schedule brief times of evaluation for the group. Usually, groups make a commitment to meet biweekly or once a month for three to six months, but some groups meet for years. Whatever the initial commitment, be sure to set aside occasional times for people to comment on how they feel the group is doing.

The Fruit of Spiritual Direction

The fruit of both group and individual spiritual direction is life-giving. Tara said that when she first began in spiritual direction, she thought, *What a wonderful luxury, to spend time*

each month just on my journey, my issues, examining my relationship with God. Now Tara says, "It wasn't long before I felt like spiritual direction was no longer a luxury, but a necessity."

Someone else said that spiritual direction "helps me refocus my attention on what God is doing and the evidence of that in my life. It helps me to recall the main events over the past month, to bring them into focus and see where God has been at work."

Speaking specifically about group spiritual direction, Erin told me, "I never had a safe place to talk like that—to be affirmed in my relationship with God"

Offering the opportunity for people to gather in groups for spiritual direction is offering them the wonderful experience of focusing attention on their ever-growing relationship with God, in whatever life situations they're facing. Jesus said that we must be "born again"; spiritual direction is about noticing that birth, which happens on a daily basis. Each day Jesus is born in us. Just as the wise men traveled together to find Jesus in the manger, so we travel together to find Jesus born in our souls.

When we meet together—whether as a group, as twosomes, or as individuals in spiritual direction—we give each other the gift of listening in the name of Jesus. This kind of loving listening bears fruit in our own lives, in our fellowship with those we love, and in our church communities.

Alice Fryling a spiritual director, a retreat leader, and the author of nine books, including [The Art of Spiritual Listening](#).

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