



The Value of Spiritual Direction in the Formation Journey

By Debbie Swindoll

In 2004, when I entered my master's program in spiritual formation, I knew nothing about the ministry of spiritual direction. I was keenly interested in how God changes His children—grows them up in Christlikeness—but unfamiliar with spiritual direction and unsure how direction fits into the change process.

Now, years later and having practiced as a spiritual director for many years, I have a deep appreciation for spiritual direction and the role it plays in spiritual transformation.

But first, what is it? Spiritual direction is a once-a-month meeting with a trained listener who will accompany you on your spiritual journey, helping you to notice God's presence and activity, as well as how you are reacting and responding. It is hospitable, confidential, and grounded in biblical truth. Spiritual direction is a ministry that helps you grow in prayer and live into your calling as a follower of Christ.

If you have never considered the ministry of spiritual direction for your life, let me share with you four benefits of spiritual direction I have personally experienced and consistently witness in my direction ministry:

1. Spiritual direction grows our spiritual attentiveness.

It is rare for God to change us without bringing to our attention what needs to be changed. God seeks our cooperation in transformation. However, it is easy for us to miss what God is inviting us to see. Many of us have an underdeveloped spiritual perception. We don't naturally, as Ignatius of Loyola suggests, "See God in all things." We need to grow our propensity to look for God in the circumstances of our lives.

Spiritual direction promotes spiritual attentiveness. **The most commonly asked questions from spiritual directors to their directees are versions of the following:**

- "What do you think God is doing in that circumstance?"
- "Where do you see God at work in your life?"
- "What do you think God's invitation is for you in this place?"



Good spiritual direction will always bring you around to these core questions, nurturing your attentiveness to perceive God's movements in your life. It always amazes me how God roots these simple questions deep into directees' hearts, bringing them to mind between direction appointments. Over time, reflecting on these questions grows our awareness of God in our daily life so that we are more attuned to His leading and what He is doing in our formation.

2. **Spiritual direction grows our awareness of how we get in our own way.**

As stated above, God seeks our cooperation in transformation. He doesn't override our wills. He woos us to respond in love and to welcome His will for our lives. But our hearts and histories can be complicated. It is not always easy for us to recognize how we are responding or resistant to God's work in our lives, much less understand why we react in certain ways to what God is doing.

It can be helpful to have someone encourage us to reflect on our reactions to God's movements. But it can also be scary. **Being able to honestly evaluate our response to God in a safe, nonjudgmental relationship is a great gift.** It can help us know ourselves in ways that we might not pursue or perceive on our own.

In addition, having an objective, loving spiritual listener who knows our story can help guard against thinking too harshly or too generously about our responses. A good spiritual director will guide a directee into the loving presence of God, where one doesn't have to hide from the Truth but is freed to see themselves in His light.

Once we begin to understand our responses to God, we can process them with Him and our director and become more open to what God is doing to transform us.

3. **Spiritual direction grows our discernment.**

At the core of spiritual formation is the development of a dependent, willing heart to follow Jesus. But we often do not have the ability to discern where Jesus is inviting, directing or calling us to action.

How can we grow to recognize the "voice" of Jesus—to distinguish His desires and promptings from the voices that play in our minds from our own thoughts and histories? How do we interpret our spiritual experiences in lieu of Scripture and God's revealed nature?



A spiritual direction relationship gives us a place to explore these questions in the presence of the Holy Spirit and another Christian who is committed to helping us find God's way. The safest place to learn discernment is in community with others who love God and love you.

As we talk, listen, and notice together in spiritual direction, we trust that God will make Himself clear. It may not happen in a single session, but over time, as we seek and wait together, we begin to see the fingerprints of God on our lives.

As God reveals Himself, we grow in our ability to recognize the way He invites, the feeling in our hearts when He is communicating, the affirmation of our spirits when we "see" Him. We also begin to identify the presence of our will when it conflicts with or welcomes His will. There are few opportunities in the church to develop skills of spiritual discernment, which makes spiritual direction a great place to grow in this area.

4. **Spiritual direction identifies and gives room for the most important questions in our lives.**

While Jesus was on earth, He was a master of asking pertinent questions. He asked the blind man what he wanted Jesus to do for him. He asked the disciples, among other things, who they said He was, why they were afraid, why they doubted, and how many loaves they possessed to feed the crowd. He asked the Father why He was forsaking Him. Questions seem to be part of being in a relationship with Jesus.

Yet, we often shy away from exploring the deeper questions on our hearts. Church is not always a safe place to vocalize our questions about God or wrestle with the questions that Jesus may be asking us. Spiritual direction, however, is a place where questions are asked, reflected on, processed, refined, and brought into God's presence.

Spiritual directors love good questions and are willing to journey with directees as God reveals and provides answers to the myriad of questions that are on our minds and hearts.

Spiritual direction provides a place and a person with whom we can voice our questions and seek answers together, such as:

- Questions about God's will regarding an important decision that we need to make
- Questions about God's love for us
- Struggles to understand why God has allowed suffering to enter our lives



Unanswered questions about God and our relationship to Him can stall us or limit progress in our formation journey. If you have these kinds of questions, spiritual direction can provide a place to honestly explore these thoughts with God, which can lead to the freedom to move closer/deepen a relationship with God and others.

These four qualities of spiritual direction give you a glimpse into the benefits of this important ministry and how it supports the Holy Spirit's work of spiritual formation.

If you feel drawn to pursue spiritual direction for your life, we have a searchable database of trained directors who would love to meet with you. Most directors are willing to have an initial meeting at no charge as you consider whether spiritual direction would be a valuable part of your spiritual development.

I encourage you to consider engaging in spiritual direction. May God lead you in your decision.