

Choosing a spiritual guide

Many people now recognise that it can be helpful to have a spiritual guide. Often this desire grows from a fruitful experience of such a relationship, typically during an individually guided retreat. The choice of a companion for a long-term relationship is likely to have important consequences in your life: you need to make the choice carefully. How should you go about it?

Choosing a guide is a very personal decision. As you seek a guide, pray for light. You may well find that you become increasingly clear about what you hope for from the relationship. Do think about this, so as to make a conscious decision - but in the end, you may want to trust your instinct.

The queries below are offered simply as a list of factors you may wish to mull over and then bear in mind as you look for someone. The list is certainly not exhaustive; and some points mentioned may seem to you unimportant, whereas others not mentioned may seem crucial.

Qualities you hope for

Different factors matter to different people. Here are some possibilities.

- Do you especially want your guide to be a woman or a man? A lay person, a priest/minister, or a member of a religious order? (If particular characteristics such as these matter to you, can you say why?)
- Would you like your guide to be a member of the same denomination?
- Do you mind whether your guide is older or younger than yourself?
- To what extent would you like conversation to feel formal or informal?
- Is it important to you that your guide is grounded in a particular tradition (e.g. Benedictine, evangelical, charismatic), or would you like someone with an eclectic approach?
- Do you hope for a guide who shares an interest in something important to you in your prayer life (e.g. music, poetry, painting, clay)?
- Would you prefer your guide to be someone whom you will not meet in any other context?

Some people have concerns about their guide's own preparation; others see this as a matter for the guide.

- Would you like a guide who makes a clear distinction between spiritual direction and counselling/psychotherapy, or one who sees overlaps between them?
- Do you want your guide to have any specific training in spiritual direction (e.g. in the Ignatian tradition)?
- Is it important to you that your guide be practised in a particular personality indicator (Myers-Briggs or the Enneagram)?
- Are you concerned about whether your guide makes an annual retreat?
- Do you want to know whether your guide has her or his own guide?
- Do you want to know whether your guide has access to supervision?

Practicalities

As well as questions about the nature of the relationship, there are practical factors which may affect your decision.

- How often do you hope to meet (e.g. monthly, every two months, every three months, by arrangement)?
- Are you able to travel to meet the guide, or do you need to be visited at home? How far are you willing to travel?
- Might it be important (e.g. because of recurrent illness) that the relationship could be conducted by correspondence at some stage?
- Would this relationship affect, or be affected by, any other one-to-one meetings you are having (e.g. counselling, therapy)?
- How do you view the question of payment? Many guides are able to offer this ministry without charge, while others will welcome a contribution in recognition of their time and the costs of their own training and supervision. (If you are in employment and are invited to make a donation, a possible guideline is whatever you yourself would earn in an hour.)

You may already have someone in mind, or know someone who can suggest possible guides. Locally, there may be a diocesan spirituality adviser or retreat house warden who can help: alternatively the Retreat Association can tell you of someone in your area who knows people who offer this ministry.

- When you have a potential guide in mind, are you able to discuss your choice with someone who has experience of this person?

The first meeting

The first meeting will be exploratory - a chance for you to get to know one another, to compare what you hope for with what the guide can offer. Your guide may suggest that you meet a few times and then review the relationship together. Throughout, do say honestly what you think and feel about your meetings.

Preparing for a meeting

Your meetings will be most fruitful if you prepare for them. Pray that the Spirit may illuminate your reflection.

- Looking back over the time since the last meeting, what has been going on in your life? How have you been feeling? What have been your prevailing moods during this period?
- Have there been moments when you have been particularly aware of God's presence or activity in your life? How did you feel at those times? Have there been any surprises?
- What are your current preoccupations? In your innermost heart, what do you most hope for?

Reviewing the relationship

For the relationship to be fruitful, there must be commitment: this is a spiritual discipline, and it may take time for you to get to know each other and for confidence to grow. Nevertheless, it is good from time to time to reflect on the relationship.

- How do you feel as you prepare for a meeting?
- How do you feel during meetings? Are you confident that what you say is heard?
- Do you feel accepted and respected or insecure and judged?
- Do you feel supported or alone? Do you feel accompanied or pressured?
- Can you say what you want to say? Are you able to be completely honest, or are you aware of reserve?
- Are any periods of silence comfortable or uncomfortable?
- Is humour a part of your meetings? Do you feel at ease?
- Do you feel challenged? If so, how do you respond to this?
- When guidance has been offered or an activity suggested, was this helpful? Did you feel free to follow it or to lay it aside?
- Do you think that the relationship still has something to offer? How might you help it to continue fruitful?
- Do you feel that the relationship may have become stuck? Might it be time for a change? Is this something you feel called to talk over with your guide?



The Retreat Association comprises these Christian retreat groups:

- Affiliates of the Retreat Association (AFF)
- Association for Promoting Retreats (APR, mainly Anglican)
- Baptist Union Retreat Group (BURG)
- Catholic Spirituality Network (CSN)
- Reflect – Methodists Supporting Spirituality and Retreats

The Retreat Association aims to foster the growth of the spiritual life by the practice of retreats. For information contact:



The Retreat Association
Clare Charity Centre
Wycombe Road
Saunderton
Bucks HP14 4BF

Tel: 01494 569056
Fax: 0871 715 1917
info@retreats.org.uk
www.retreats.org.uk

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