



# **Guidance for Developing Formation Programmes for Spiritual Directors**

Retreat Association Guidance for Developing Formation Programmes for Spiritual Directors © 2024  
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## THE STORY BEHIND THE GUIDANCE

This publication is intended to offer guidance for those involved in the planning and delivery of spiritual direction courses and has come about as a result of the vision, experience and expertise of those working and collaborating in this ministry over a number of years.

The concept first emerged at a national conference of practitioners in the field of spiritual direction training facilitated by the Retreat Association in 2019. As well as enabling the sharing of good practice and continuing professional development, these conferences include a focus on where there may be opportunities for ongoing support and encouragement in this valuable ministry.

At the conference a working party was established to explore the possibility of producing future guidelines for spiritual direction course content. Over the next two years the working party put together a proposal for the key components that this document might include. These were shared at the next conference in 2021 and again in a fully drafted document in 2023 where active discussion and feedback was welcomed and encouraged. Alongside responses from practitioners from a number of Christian spiritual traditions, this feedback helped to inform the process and culminated in a final document that we present today.

As with our preceding Guidelines for Spiritual Direction published in 2016, this is a working document which we hope course leaders will use to best suit the delivery of their local needs. It is intended to complement rather than replace the existing resources and gathered wisdom of those planning and delivering course content. It is our hope that this document will continue to support and encourage those working in this ministry for many years to come.

*Alison MacTier and the Working Party, February 2024*

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

Those who develop programmes for the formation of spiritual directors carry a significant responsibility.

Anyone emerging from such a programme and beginning their ministry as a spiritual director may go on to accompany individuals over a considerable time. In doing so, they will have a sustained impact, for good or ill, on many lives.

The development of formation programmes is a complex task and many of us who have set out on this pathway have asked ourselves how competent we are to do this work and wondered where to turn for help.

In writing this guidance, our aim is to support and encourage best practice in the many diverse settings in which formation of spiritual directors takes place, remaining mindful of our own responsibility towards the future directees of unknown people on unknown future programmes.

We have endeavoured to make the guidance applicable to a breadth of users. We hope that it will be a valuable aid to those seeking to initiate a course with no prior experience, but also provide support and encouragement to those who have long experience and who are engaging with the ongoing development of programmes that have a significant history.

Throughout the guidance we have spoken of 'spiritual direction' and have used the terms 'director' to refer to the person offering the ministry and 'directee' to refer to the individual receiving the ministry.

In doing so, we recognise that some will prefer to use terms such as 'spiritual companion' or 'spiritual accompaniment'. However, the term spiritual direction is well established and refers not to the person offering the ministry giving directions, but to the one receiving the ministry being invited to continually discover which direction they are facing in. Are they turned towards God or not?

There are some keywords that we have used throughout the document.

- **Formation**

In referring to the 'formation' of spiritual directors rather than 'training', we have been holding several tensions in balance.

In a world where there can often be an over-emphasis on doing rather than being; on the task we are engaged upon rather than the person in front of us; and on training in functionality rather than personal transformation, we have sought to both recognise the value of these tensions and counteract the imbalance.

We advocate the terminology of formation rather than training because this seems to best encompass a wholistic sense of the development of the person, including their inner qualities and disposition that will be manifest in their practice of spiritual direction.

- **Congruence**

Another idea we have used repeatedly is that of '*congruence*'. Put simply, congruence refers to a similarity or matching of values.

The focus of spiritual direction is on the relationship of the directee with God. Any formation programme must share the same ultimate focus – to enable the unknown future directees of present participants to deepen their experience of God and gain greater congruence between their inner life (beliefs, values etc.) and the choices they make in life.

It is also important that there is congruence between the manner of formation and of spiritual direction, such that the skills and attributes that we seek to form are clearly demonstrated and lived within the programme, whilst recognising that there are some differences in the two practices.

- **Discernment – the essence of spiritual direction**

Discernment refers to the recognition of the movements of the Spirit; how freely we respond to the invitation of God held out to us and paying attention to what might enable that freedom or hinder it. As such, discernment is at the heart of the work of spiritual direction and permeates all aspects of the work of formation of spiritual directors.

### **Using the document**

It is not our intention to produce an outline of any particular way in which programmes should be run. Nor is it our intention that the many aspects we outline are followed to the letter.

Programmes need to respond to God's call in their own unique context and will be constantly evolving over their lifetime. To encourage this ongoing process, the guidance includes points both for self-reflection and for reflection on the practice of formation and the role of the team delivering the programme.

Experienced leaders may choose to use the guidance as a tool for ongoing review of their programme, or to review a particular strand of it. Those involved in setting up a new initiative may find it helpful to work through several or all sections of the guidance as they begin the process of development.

Conversation with other trainers (for example at the Retreat Association's events for spiritual direction trainers, with other dioceses, and in local initiatives) is invaluable in gaining practical advice, helping to develop thinking further and in developing possible collaboration.

We offer this guidance in the knowledge that it needs to be a living document, to be updated as necessary, in order that it continues to reflect current best practice.

## 2. ASPECTS OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

### a. Spiritual direction as relationship

The ministry of Christian spiritual direction involves relationships between God, the person offering this ministry and the person receiving this ministry.

The role of the director is to help the directee focus on their relationship with God and so enable their personal vocation (to become the person they were created to be) to grow and be more fully lived out through the empowering work of the Holy Spirit.

The directee's life is lived in relationship to God, creation, the world, local and faith communities. Spiritual direction seeks to enable the directee to reflect on the dynamic interaction between their experiences of prayer and life, theology and spirituality.

The director has significant potential power and responsibility which should be exercised with great care to ensure the intention of the relationship and the autonomy of the directee are not undermined. This involves care in the use of language, in the expression of moral judgements and in the handling of decision-making.

The director will be offering this ministry as part of their expression of personal vocation and within the context of their own spiritual life in relationship to their faith community and their own director.

### b. The focus of spiritual direction

The focus of the director is primarily on the inner life of the directee, and attention to this in the context of the experience of life and spiritual activities rather than as a moral guardian or confessor.

The director will seek to:

- listen discerningly to what is shared
- respond in ways that are conducive to the directee's discernment of God in their life
- offer insights and perspectives that are helpful to the directee in their communication and response to God and living this out in their life.

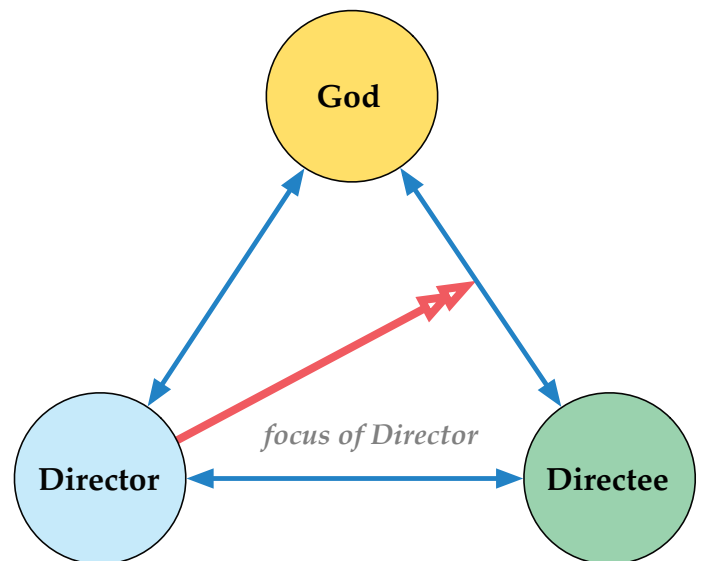


Figure 1 Diagram showing the focus of the director in a session of spiritual direction in relation to the primary relational dynamics – i.e. the two persons and God.

Sections a and b above taken from Spiritual Direction Guidelines, published by the Retreat Association.

### c. Discernment – the essence of spiritual direction

From the above it can be seen that discernment lies in the heart of the practice of spiritual direction. It can be defined as the reflective processes that enable awareness of how God is or is not at the centre of a person's life, motivations and actions. This awareness enables conscious choices to be

made in response. A discerning spiritual director seeks to pay attention, in the conversation with the directee, to what is being revealed about the directee's orientation to God and facilitate this awareness in the directee and explore the implications and response. They thereby not only facilitate discernment but enable a development of the discerning ability of the directee.

There are some significant tools for discernment in the Christian tradition, not least in the Ignatian tradition. However, it is important to recognise that any tradition's approach, with its own particular terminology and processes, forms part of the bigger picture of the fundamental matter of discernment in faithful living.

The centrality of discernment in spiritual direction makes it vital to the process of the formation of spiritual directors. It is relevant to every aspect, from the publicity inviting participation, through the selection process, the shape and content of the programme and the way in which participants consider their future ministry.

**d. The context of spiritual direction**

Spiritual direction takes place within the context of life, wider relationships and support structures. The diagram can be developed to illustrate these, showing how this quickly becomes complex.

This gives a sense of the directee looking at God within the context of their life and bringing this wider life to the spiritual director. The spiritual director then undertakes supervision and so looks at their experience of giving spiritual direction with the supervisor.

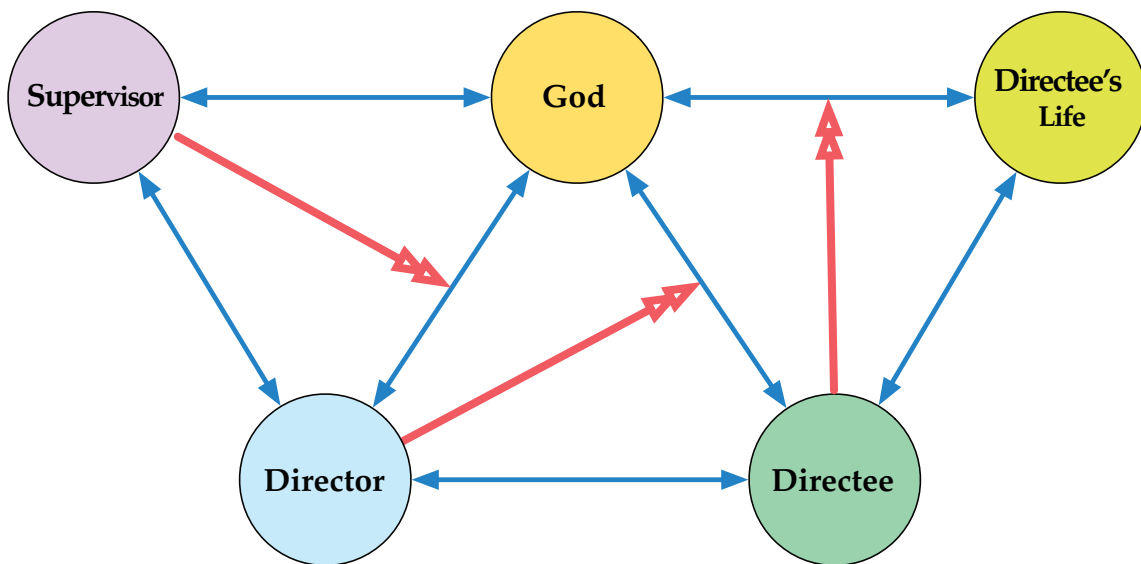


Figure 2: Extending the diagram to show the relationships with the directee's life and the supervisor of the spiritual director.

The diagram can be taken further, to show the spiritual director's spiritual director, the supervisor's supervisor, and so on. Quickly we see a complex web of relationships that are all part of the intention to support the faith life of the directee. This web of relationships can be seen as something of the body of Christ at work in supporting its multiple parts (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:12-27), all in the context of life in the world.

### 3. THE FORMATION OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTORS

#### a. Formation

Christian spiritual direction is a ministry of the Church that provides a place where people are able to attend to their relationship with God.

Those who offer this ministry are recognised to have received a gift to undertake it. First Corinthians 12 shows how gifts are given by the Spirit to specific people for the common good and to build up the Body, the Church. Spiritual direction can be seen as one of these gifts. The recognition of the gift of spiritual direction is an ongoing process of discernment that begins prior to embarking on this ministry and continues throughout the process of development and into the ongoing practice. (For different people at different stages of this progression, the discernment may be that the gift is not present to continue.)

Thus, developing the ministry of spiritual direction is not so much one of 'training' or 'education' but rather a process of *formation* to support and enable the gift to grow and flourish. This formation involves the whole person and helps the person grow and mature in their relationship with God and the world around them. The intention of this formation is, therefore, for the flourishing of the person and their gifts. Jesus says '*I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full*' (John 10:10)<sup>1</sup> and St Irenaeus '*The glory of God is a living man/woman; and the life of a man/woman consists in beholding God*'<sup>2</sup>. The purpose of the process of 'growing' or 'forming' is to enable each individual to become more fully alive to God, more fully the person they were created to be – their true selves.

This means that the task of a formation programme is to enable the gift of spiritual direction to grow and flourish in its participants; to create a context offering the optimum conditions for the growth of this specific gift, given by the Spirit to build up the Church.

Key aspects of the gift of spiritual direction are:

- a living relationship with God expressed in prayer and the spiritual life as lived out in the world and the Church
- an attentiveness to discerning God in daily life
- the ability to enable others to experience God and discern God in their lives
- the ability to listen to people with an attentiveness to spiritual depth that lies behind the words, whilst also being attentive to their own inner processes which may or may not be affecting this.

#### Points for reflection

- What is your understanding of the process of developing spiritual directors?
- How does the description above fit with your experience of developing as a spiritual director?
- In what ways do you recognise the aspects of the gift of spiritual direction above?
- Try writing your own description of the key aspects of the gift of spiritual direction.



## b. The importance of congruence

A significant aspect of spiritual direction is the enabling of a greater congruence between a person's inner life (their beliefs, values etc.) and their outer life, (their behaviour, practices, relationships etc).

It is essential that any programme aimed at developing and forming spiritual directors has a congruence with the process of spiritual direction itself. There will be a consistency between the formation process and the desired skills and attributes we are seeking to form. A culture is established which seeks to live the values and approach of spiritual direction – creating a living spiritual direction community. The facilitation team is significant in modelling the processes and focus that participants will grow to inhabit.

The purpose of any course is the growing and forming of each participant to become more fully alive to God, more fully the person they are created to be and continue to discern whether there is a gift for and a call to spiritual direction ministry, while gaining the desirable knowledge and practical skills.

For a programme of formation to be congruent with the process of spiritual direction, the role of the facilitators will be to help the participants focus on their relationship with God, develop abilities, grow gifts and, most importantly, explore their personal calling. Those leading the programme model the same focus towards participants as a spiritual director towards their directees.

This diagram shows the focus of the facilitation team within the dynamics of the relationship between God, the team and the course participants, which is similar to the model of spiritual direction on page 6. The facilitators accompany the participants for the duration of the course, holding a safe space for them to listen and respond to God in their lives. In this way, the team models a primary focus on attentiveness to God and as the potential directors become directors, they are formed so as to maintain this focus. (NB for clarity of illustration we are showing God twice. We do not believe there are different Gods for the two processes!)

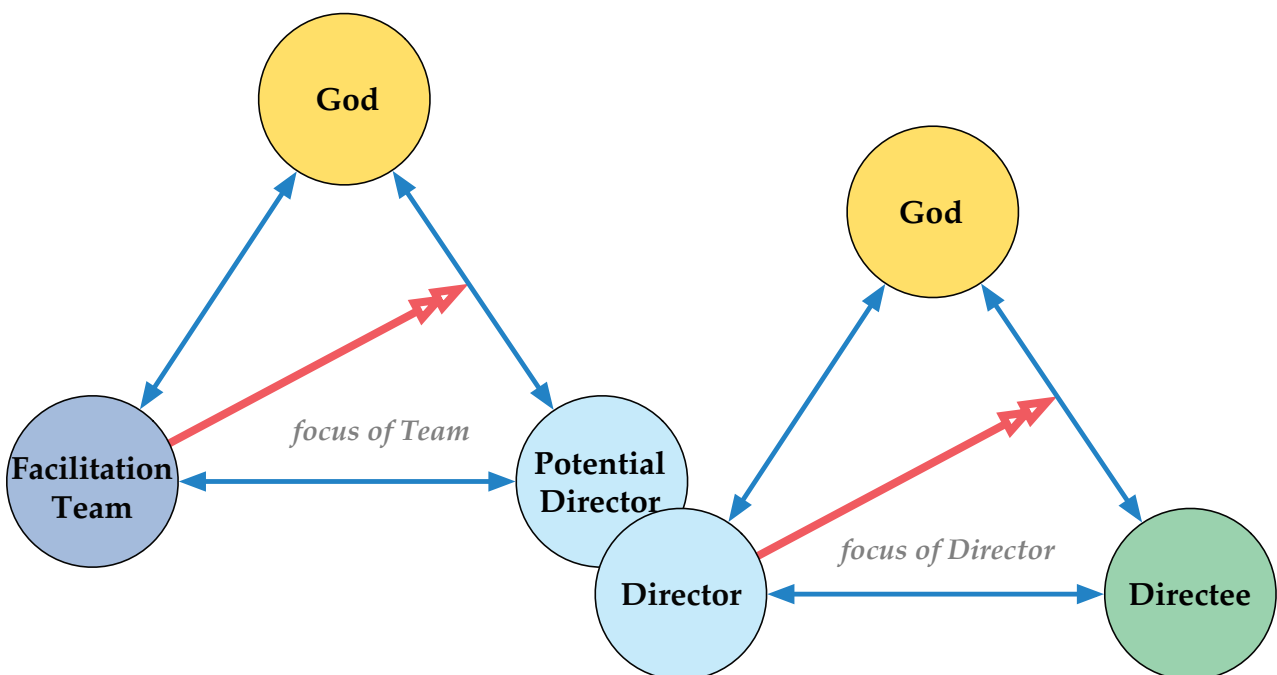


Figure 3: Showing the congruence between the focus in the formation of spiritual directors and the focus of spiritual direction.

A further important element of congruence is the nurturing of a discerning approach through all the elements of a programme. A programme can be offered and facilitated in ways that encourage and affirm a discerning approach (e.g. inviting a God-centred listening and choosing how to respond) or a more rule-based approach (e.g. teaching positive and negative responses to particular situations). As has already been noted, the discerning nature of spiritual direction calls for a discerning approach to all aspects of a development programme. This necessitates an alertness to the areas where discernment, rather than rule applying, can be exercised. More specifically, it calls for a spaciousness in the programme design and an agility in those delivering the programme to be creative and discerning.

We have shown how the congruence between the focus of spiritual direction and the focus of spiritual direction formation is exemplified by the attentiveness to the presence of God and the discerning this requires, the diagram illustrating how the fostering of this stance in the spiritual director is the outcome of a formation process and team maintaining this stance.

There are aspects of formation that are not a primary aspect of spiritual direction. These include the intentional development of particular gifts and skills (listening and responding appropriately), exercises and processes designed to develop or illustrate key aspects, the setting of assignments, observation and giving feedback on practice. So there are appropriate distinctions – ‘incongruencies’ – between spiritual direction and spiritual direction formation that are worth recognising.

#### **Points for reflection**

- How do you respond to this diagram? Does it reflect the focus of the course you are planning / running?
- How do you model this as the team facilitating this course, to maintain a similar focus to that which you are encouraging in the participants?
- What needs to be in place to ensure the course is a safe space?
- How will facilitators and participants listen and respond to God and to each other to build this living spiritual direction community?
- What are the incongruencies you want to name?

## 4. EVOLVING A FORMATION PROGRAMME

Many programmes develop through an evolutionary process. The way in which a programme is designed is an evolutionary dynamic with a range of elements to consider – such as aims, processes, values, key content, and intended audience. Once started, the programme will continue to evolve as course leaders experience its relative strengths and weaknesses, gaining new insights and material for potential inclusion in the next programme. There will often be an evolutionary dynamic, as the programme unfolds, whereby content needs to be adapted for the particular needs of the group, or to accommodate unforeseen events.

As with the ministry of spiritual direction, those preparing and running a programme will benefit from a stance that is an open and responsive one, seeking to listen to the leading of the Spirit as the programme unfolds. This unfolding will occur somewhere between the committed intention of the programme (its aims, values and processes) and the realities of the team and group of participants with the gifts, needs and interactions that they bring.

What follows are resources to guide the thinking and praying in preparing a programme. These interrelate and may all be used at different stages of the programme planning process. However, initial clarity about the aims, values and spirituality will serve the rest of the work well.

### **a. Primary questions: clarifying the aim, values and spirituality of the programme**

These include some fundamental ‘Why?’ questions that will establish clarity of purpose, tone and priorities for the many practical decisions involved in the planning and running of a programme.

#### *The aim*

- What is the primary intention for your programme?

#### *The values*

- What values do you see undergirding the approach?
- What values do you need to see embodied in the approach?

#### *The spirituality*

- What undergirding of spirituality – prayer, liturgy, reflection etc. will there be?
- What understanding of spiritual direction will be used?
- What understanding of discernment will be used?
- What spiritual traditions inform your approach? (Ignatian, Carmelite, Franciscan etc.)
- How will those of other traditions be valued and related to?
- How will you seek to acknowledge the background, influences, theological assumptions and agendas that you carry with you?

## **b. Practical questions: level of development hoped for, format, audience and safeguarding**

These include some of the key 'How?' questions that will help determine other important aspects of the shaping and content of a programme.

### *The level of development hoped for*

- What sort of experience / awareness / motivation would you like your participants to have in order to begin the programme?
- What sort of effect do you intend the programme to have on its participants? What role(s) do you hope they will be able to undertake after completing the course (assuming a discernment affirming a participant in this)?
- What might the next level of development be beyond this programme?

### *The format*

- What format will be used? Days, half-days, evenings, weekends, residential, online, mixed mode, and so on?
- What time commitment will be involved?
- What shape / processes will be used?

### *Intended audience*

- What faith experience / commitment is needed?
- How will you engage with diversity & inclusivity? (e.g. gender / sexuality, age, race, culture, faith traditions)
- Who might be included / excluded? How might you address this?

### *Safeguarding*

- What are the policies regarding safeguarding and safer recruitment that, because of your organisational context, you are required to adhere to? (These may be due to denominational or institutional structures or legal requirements.)
- What practical arrangements will be needed in order to fulfil these requirements?

## **c. Prerequisites for participants**

The importance of beginning a programme with committed participants who are likely to enrich the course cannot be overemphasised. The core skills and qualities expected in a spiritual director are set out in the Retreat Association's *Spiritual Direction Guidelines* (see *Appendices 2 and 3*). Whilst some of those skills and qualities may be honed along the way, there are initial prerequisite characteristics and practices which need to be present from the outset in order for participants to engage well with a programme.

## **i) Selection**

The following points are particularly recommended as markers for selection of candidates:

- Commitment to their own prayer and spiritual development, and an ability to share how this affects their life.
- Receiving spiritual accompaniment and valuing it.
- A sense of calling to this ministry – however underdeveloped at this stage.
- Participating in a Christian community.
- A desire to recognise and respond to God in their life.
- Finding themselves listening to others with an ear to the spiritual and God.
- An ability and intention to attend all sessions.
- Personal qualities seen to be present and confirmed by interview and references may include: open to 'otherness', ability to listen, humility, enthusiasm, generosity of spirit, flexibility, honesty, self-awareness, and ability to exercise discretion.

## **ii) Interviews**

The interview is part of an overall process of discernment by the course leadership team. It is suggested that interviews be conducted by more than one course leader and include predetermined questions which elicit any concerns or omissions that may have arisen as a result of the application form answers or references. Ultimately 'gut feeling' (or intuitive internal response) needs to be taken into account alongside the overall suitability of the candidate for the programme.

A balance needs to be found between all these prerequisites, and care taken that, in the spirit of accompaniment, the Holy Spirit is acknowledged and candidates with potential are not excluded.

*See Appendix 1 giving specimen questions for an application form.*

## **d. Expected outcomes**

Working with the model that a course is congruent with spiritual direction itself, as much consideration should be given to its end as to its beginning. It is important to be clear about the process, content and prerequisites of a course, but equally important to have clarity regarding what constitutes a successful outcome. This is not as simple as someone completing the course and becoming a practising spiritual director. In some cases, a good outcome might be a participant reaching a place of understanding that spiritual direction is not for them at time of completion. This frees them up to explore, discern and develop their ministry elsewhere, bearing with them the wisdom and gifts gained along the way.

When establishing outcomes, course leaders should be alert to the way in which their expectations will reflect their own preferences and approaches to working practices. This assumes a self-awareness and openness to holding a clear space for the formation of others in the same way that a clear space is held for a directee by a director in order to grow and

develop. It enables the participant to use the course process to grow into the spiritual director they were meant to be, rather than a replica of their trainer.

Ideally the outcome of formation is that participants fulfil whatever criteria exist to begin their practice as a novice spiritual director. There will need to be some element of discernment and reflection around the kind of dispositions and abilities course leaders wish participants to manifest before they are considered ready to accompany others. These could be presented as how someone should 'be' and what they should be able to 'do'.

The following areas help course leaders recognise signs of growth in an individual throughout the training and formation process, leading to a clear sense of the participant's readiness to practise spiritual direction:

- The individual's relationship with God.
- Personal qualities and self-awareness.
- Skills.
- Knowledge.

The course leaders should agree the definition of the factors above and the way in which they are observed, assessed and/or discerned throughout the process and towards the end of the training. Questions to reflect on include:

- What specifically might a course include to develop these attributes and skills, and to what standard or level?
- What measures are used to ascertain that any one of these attributes and skills are present in a course participant?

Section D of the *Spiritual Direction Guidelines* also offers a useful checklist for course leaders to work to, outlining core skills and qualities of a spiritual director (see *Appendix 2*). Course leaders could reflect on these questions in the context of establishing outcomes for the course:

- To what extent does this checklist help answer the questions and categories above?
- Do they all need to be manifest in a participant at the end of the course? Or are some essential and others can be acquired with experience?
- Do course leaders expect those completing the course to be novice spiritual directors or reasonably expert?
- How do course leaders give feedback where there are gaps? How significant do the gaps need to be before feedback is given? What advice do course leaders give where someone falls short of these 'outcomes' or qualities?

Good practice guidelines as in Section F of the *Spiritual Direction Guidelines* (see *Appendix 3*) represent another type of expected outcome, as they include the probability that those who complete a course are expected to operate comfortably within an established code of practice.

Questions that arise from this include:

- Where in the course will this be addressed?
- What is the policy if any of these guidelines are challenged or discounted/avoided?
- Will adherence to these guidelines be monitored after the course, and if so, how?

Further contextual questions needing to be considered include:

- Does this course dovetail with other programmes?
- Is there a basic listening course, for instance, that is a prerequisite?
- What happens regarding ongoing personal development as a spiritual director over the coming years?
- Is there a more advanced spiritual direction course that it would lead on to?

A further consideration is what participants receive at the end of the training or formation.

Questions to be considered may include:

- Is there an achievement certificate or a completion/attendance certificate?
- Are participants automatically commissioned by a church leader?
- What evidence of completing the course will they have and may be needed if, for example, they are moving to another region/country?
- What responsibility does a training carry for participants and where they go next or what they might offer?
- Is there a probation period?
- How do they find a supervisor?

Most importantly, course leaders need to be clear that the course outcomes are consistent with the aims and objectives of the course, as outlined at the outset. For example, was the aim to provide an online course for anyone in the UK and Europe to participate in or was it to form ten new prayer groups for retreat in daily life? Is that what the outcomes describe?



## 5. DEVELOPING PROGRAMME PROCESS AND CONTENT

The development of appropriate content, process and shape for a programme enables an effective formational journey for participants, that is intentional, developmental and also holds each individual within their own particular journey. Below, we consider some key areas for reflection on that developmental process.

### a. The tension between process and content

It is common that those putting a programme together begin by thinking about its content. What subjects do we need to cover? What resources are needed? These content questions can be easier to identify and manage, but often this will be at the cost of the consideration of the formative process.

If a spiritual direction session is seen as a journey, where the intended destination is for the directee to be more aware of the mystery of God's presence in their life, the path of this journey is unfolding rather than predetermined. There may be common features, like beginnings, middles and ends, but there is a great deal of agility needed by the director to be responsive to the twists and turns that emerge. It is consciousness of process that enables this agility – the ability not to seek to control the path, but rather hold attentiveness to the person, to the intention of the conversation, and to the ongoing discerning of what is/is not more helpful to pay attention to.

Thus, any formation programme needs to be attentive to how it is allowing this 'agility' to grow in its participants. This requires primary attention to the *process* of the programme with content as an important secondary point of interest. Thus, in shaping and sequencing of a programme, *the content needs to serve the process*.

There is an important dialogue between process and content. Particular areas of content need to be interrogated by process – do they serve the process and if so, how do they fit with it? What are the options? Some areas of content may seem important, but it is unclear as to how they serve the process. Time spent wrestling these questions may help sharpen the process and develop understanding of whether a particular area of content is suitable for the programme. As programmes are developing, it is a natural part of the process to have these tensions arise and to see where they lead.

### b. Shaping and sequencing the process

There are multiple journeys that interplay with each other in the formation process. Attention needs to be given to how a programme is both shaped and sequenced:

*Personal journey:* the journey with God of each individual, both participants and team members, as they follow a programme. This journey involves a person's growth as a unique individual and deepening of their experience and understanding of God as well as the emergence of gifts and discernment of vocation, be that to the ministry of spiritual direction or movement towards another expression of vocation.

*Corporate journey:* Bringing any group of people together involves them in a corporate process that interplays with their individual journeys.



*Developmental journey:* There is a journey in the development of key skills necessary for the discerning listening involved in spiritual direction. Participants need to be able to both listen and know what they are listening for, as well as being able to respond appropriately. It can be helpful to tease out specific skills and the broad stages of their development.

There are some aspects to shaping and sequencing a process that are common sense progressions, others that need careful thought to ensure coherence, while others where sequence is immaterial.

#### *Transformative dynamics*

It is worth paying attention to key dynamics that will help this shaping and sequencing. The dynamic of the paschal mystery and the dynamic of narrative are particularly relevant.

- *The paschal dynamic: life – death – new life*  
Christ's model of birth, mission, passion, resurrection is the transformative process at the heart of Christianity. It is important to consider how a programme maintains the capacity for this life – death – life journey to be experienced in multiple ways by all involved.

Transformative growth involves the losing of habits, skills, understandings, and so on, in order for new habits, skills and understandings to emerge. This will cause levels of disturbance, anxiety and bereavement to emerge, as well as the moments of joy and delight when new life is recognised. The sequencing of subject matter may be helpfully shaped to account for this dynamic, but equally, this needs to be held sensitively so that those who find their movement in this process is at a different rate or stage to others are held and supported in their dynamic.

- *The narrative dynamic: beginning – middle – end*  
As in good stories, most conversations and journeys have the stages of beginning, middle and end, with transitions between them. The same is true of spiritual direction and there are particularities about the three stages in what needs attention. Beginnings are about helping people orientate and get going; middles about exploring the terrain – negotiating ups and downs; endings draw things towards a conclusion and point to what might lie beyond.

*Appendix 4 identifies some other transformative dynamics from the Christian spiritual tradition.*

### **c. Developing discerning listening**

There are various ways in which a programme can nurture the appropriate ability to listen and discern. This is about praxis rather than theory. A significant element of a programme needs to be around giving real practice in listening, receiving feedback from observation, and reflecting on experience in ways that nurture the gifts of listening and discernment.

Spiritual directors listen to self, to the directee and to God. They listen for their own internal responses and for those of their directee. They learn to sift what they are noticing and to discern what seems to move them and their directee towards or away from God. They learn to reflect back to the directee what might be more helpful for them to pay attention to.

Careful consideration is needed in shaping a programme so that all these aspects of listening and discerning are woven together.

*Listening skills to develop:*

- Simple non-responsive 'generous' listening in order to hear the directee's story on a deeper level.
- Being able to respond appropriately requires basic listening skills (such as open/closed questions and focusing) as well as being able to choose when and how to respond, and dealing with distractions.
- Awareness of self, listening to the inner movements, hindrances, and so on. Developing self-supervision – leading to receiving supervision.

*Discernment skills:*

- Personal – developing awareness of the movements of the Spirit through reflecting on personal experiences.
- Listening – developing the skills of listening to the movements of the Spirit through practice and receiving feedback.
- Responding – developing, through practising the skills of following and deepening the movements of the Spirit in the directee's story.
- Vocational – attending to the ongoing process of discerning a call to spiritual direction.

*Appendix 5 shows two different models of how a programme's days have been shaped in order to enable this development.*

These journeys of process, skills development and growth in understanding interrelate and interact. Attention to them will help shape a process that is responsive and allows growth and development at different rates within one programme.

**Points for reflection**

How will/ does your programme embody the paschal dynamic when applied to:

- the personal journeys of each individual involved (participants and team)
- the journey of the group/groups (all involved, the participants, the team)
- the development of skills and understandings (e.g. listening, discernment, understanding of spiritual direction).

How will/ does your programme attend to the narrative dynamic as it applies to:

- the overall programme – its beginning, middle and end
- the formation of the group and sub-groups – their beginning, middle and end
- the shape of each session, topic, activity.

How will your programme nurture discerning listening in terms of:

- its shaping and phasing – what will be the key elements and dynamics?
- listening and discerning aspects introduced/ modelled/ practised
- addressing the personal discernment and personal vocational discernment as it unfolds?

#### **d. Developing content**

As has already been said, it is important that content is included to serve the purpose of the programme and at appropriate places in the process. There are topics that are relevant and vital to explore, others that may be helpful but not essential.

It is also important to recognise that much is taught implicitly. For example, openness, grace and discernment can be modelled by the programme leaders. Thus, it is worth asking, what are we going to teach by the way we do things and what is it that we need to explore in a more direct/explicit way?

Teaching can be carried out in a number of ways and good adult education principles are important to utilise – inviting reflection on experience, providing frameworks to be used in reflection, offering reading and researching suggestions – these are all conducive to learning and personal insight. Team members will bring their own gifts and experiences, strengths and weaknesses, areas of competency and areas for growth.

In shaping the programme, you might consider how the diverse gifts of the team are being drawn upon and how the individual team members are supported in growing and developing in their role.

##### *i. The content–process dialogue*

Programme design can be seen as a dynamic dialogue that might be helped by the following questions. It doesn't matter particularly where you start.

#### **Points for reflection**

- What is the content (or lack of it) being taught by process?
- What is the process (or lack of it) being taught by content?
- What is the balance of content–process we are seeking?

##### *ii. Flexibility*

Another consideration in forming a programme is maintaining a flexible approach that is able to respond to particular circumstances as well as learning to adapt as the programme unfolds. Being flexible will embody an organic process congruent with the nature of spiritual direction.

## 6. PROGRAMME DEVELOPMENT

We suggest seven steps describing a possible pathway for developing course content and structure:

- a. Reflecting on the formation team.
- b. Engaging with aspects of spiritual direction.
- c. Engaging with the relationships present within spiritual direction.
- d. Engaging with the conversation of development.
- e. Shaping and sequencing.
- f. Creating a balanced programme.
- g. Reviewing the programme.

### a. The formation team

The work of God in a person is clearly the most important part of any formation programme. Second to this, the team facilitating a programme is the most significant resource offered to participants. Thus careful discernment is needed in order to provide appropriate leadership. Team members will need spiritual maturity, prayerful and discerning lives, deep consciousness of the role of the spiritual director and the ability to work collaboratively and play their part in a range of activities and responsibilities. They will need to have, or be able to develop, good facilitation and presentation skills in order to enable the learning and development of diverse groups of participants.

Discernment is needed to consider the spirituality, experience, skills, gifts and personalities that individuals will bring to the dynamics of the team. It is valuable to have a team that has a diversity of skills, personality, and other attributes, so as to model something of the diversity of spiritual direction.

Team membership is never going to be static, so ongoing consideration of the efficacy of team members and of longer-term succession planning are factors that need regular review.

#### Points for reflection

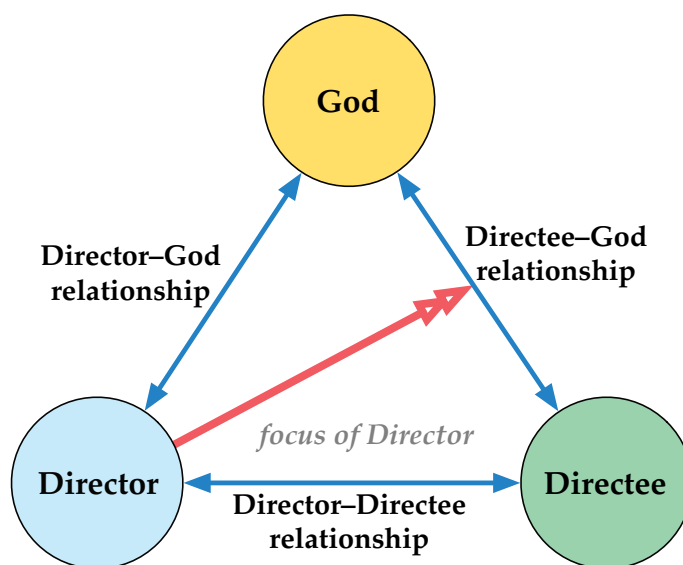
- Who are you as facilitators?
- What is your understanding of spiritual direction?
- How do you relate to each other within the team?
- What is the nature of the space you are creating within the team?
- Who are your participants?
- How do you understand your role in the formation of spiritual directors?
- How does the creative tension between process and content sit with you?

## b. Engaging with aspects of spiritual direction

- What are the different aspects of spiritual direction that your formation programme seeks to nurture?
- How would you describe each of those aspects?
- How might these be presented within the course?
- How might they be shown within the course processes?

You can see a worked example of this in Appendix 6.

## c. Engaging with the relationships present within spiritual direction



Within this model of spiritual direction, there are seven areas that might need to be considered when considering course content.

1. God
2. The Director
3. The Directee
4. Director-God relationship
5. Directee-God relationship
6. Director-Directee relationship
7. The focus of the Director.

- Reflecting on each of these seven places of the model, what is the essential content that a course needs to include?
- Does this highlight any gaps in your thinking about course content (either for a proposed course or a course you are already facilitating)?
- Do you have a balance of content that covers all these areas and relationships without unduly weighting one particular area?
- What might you need to be mindful of in maintaining such a balance as the course develops and then runs?

There is a worked example of this process in Appendix 7.

#### **d. Engaging with the conversation of development**

Having reflected upon possible course content in these two suggested ways, you might now ponder how they inform and interact with each other.

Are there things that you discovered from sections B and C above that:

- affirm each other
- question each other
- challenge each other
- develop each other?

As your sense of course content begins to emerge, how might this content be developed within a programme – either by:

- course processes that develop over time
- presented material
- being modelled by the facilitation team?

At this stage you may be feeling overwhelmed by the task in hand!

However, with patience and by reflecting within the facilitation team, ongoing engagement with this can be fruitful.

#### **e. Shaping and sequencing**

As some clarity around the course content begins to emerge, you will need to pay attention to how you shape its overall structure (for example, see section on sequencing above).

To be able to do this, you will need to give thought to the structure and timing of the individual course sessions.

#### **f. Creating a balanced programme**

Just as in the balance of conversation between director and directee, where the director needs to be mindful of the extent of their input, if there is more ‘talking to’ participants than their prayer, reflection and practice this might pose questions about the balance of the programme.

Good adult educational principles are based on efficacy of learning. Two points in particular are valuable. One is that the best learning is from what is discovered or worked out by the student, the second is that different people have different learning styles and so a variety of activity enables a broader learning.

Experience shows that the learning that is most valued and most effective in developing the necessary gifts and skills of spiritual direction is the experiential learning of prayer, listening practice and supported reflection.

There is a place for some degree of 'teaching' but often the more creative and reflective approach is the more effective. One general approach can be to regard 'taught content' as 'helpful perspectives' and so to enable active interaction between them.

Important elements of a balanced programme are:

- **prayer and reflection** – time for personal prayer and reflection: to continue to develop a relationship with God and reflection skills
- **praxis** – time in groups to practise listening, discerning listening and so develop the core skills in spiritual direction
- **supervision** – time to reflect on one's practice, personal growth and skills development, receive feedback and identify further areas for development
- **input** – providing input on the key skills and perspectives of spiritual direction.

#### Points for reflection

- Looking at your current planning progress, review and reflect back on a time that will be given to these four elements of a balanced programme. How does the balance look/feel?
- There can be a tendency to overemphasise content, at the cost of prayer, reflection and praxis. What provision have you made for this in your plans?

#### g. Reviewing the programme

A programme of formation will evolve as those both leading and participating experience its strengths and weaknesses, gain new insights and find new material. This process will benefit from regular, planned reviews which over time will focus on:

- Course process and content
- Team strengths, weaknesses and development
- How the course is meeting its intended outcomes.

Reviews may consider the following:

- Inviting feedback from participants
- Inviting an external facilitator to help the team to review and reflect together.

How will you make space alongside running your programme to review and revise it on a regular basis?

References:

1 The Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

2 Irenaeus of Lyon, *Against Heresies*, Book 4:20:7 Translated by J Keble (James Parker & Co, Oxford, 1872).

## **APPENDIX 1: Specimen questions for an application form**

Basic details of name, occupation, contact details etc.

### **a. Why are you applying for this programme?**

Please say something about what attracts you to it; why now and how it is appropriate for you at this point in time; particular hopes you have for it; how it will fit into your life and how life might need to adjust to accommodate the programme; your ability to participate in it all; any reservations or questions you have.

### **b. Please describe your experience of spiritual direction and its impact on your life.**

Include how long you have received spiritual direction; how you started; any significant experience; what you value about it; other forms of spiritual accompaniment you've experienced – e.g. individually guided retreats, weeks of guided prayer, spiritual support groups.

### **c. Please say something about your experience as a listener.**

Include if you have had any prior training in this; do people speak to you about personal and spiritual things; are you drawn to listening to others and if so, how does doing listening affect you.

### **d. Please describe something of your spiritual life.**

You might include descriptions of what prayer is for you; the ups and downs of prayer; your relationship with God; participation in a faith community; any established pattern of prayer practices you may have (e.g. particular spiritual disciplines that are important to you, rule of life, experience of retreats).

### **e. Any other information you'd like to share with us.**



## APPENDIX 2: First extract from *Spiritual Direction Guidelines*, published by the Retreat Association

### Section D. Core skills and qualities of a spiritual director

These skills and qualities are aspired to and a spiritual director would be committed to continuing development in these areas. The core skills and qualities of a spiritual director listed below should make it clear that spiritual direction is not about being directive, but a work of great humility in the service of transparency to the Holy Spirit.

1. **Prayer:** The primary requirement is that the person should have an ongoing relationship with God and a commitment to deepening that relationship. It is essential that any person offering the ministry of spiritual direction should themselves meet regularly with a spiritual director.
2. **Listening:** A person who shows themselves able to listen on many levels and pick up deeper resonances ('holy listening') and is able to foster the directee's skills of articulating their thoughts and feelings.
3. **Restraint:** A person who is able to hold themselves in check and hold the safe, welcoming and hospitable space in which the spiritual direction conversation can develop. This affects listening, holding boundaries and handling the power balance in the direction conversation with integrity.
4. **Clarity:** A person who can enable clarity in establishing agreement with the directee on the length and frequency of sessions and the process for evaluating and terminating the relationship, e.g. contracting, negotiating to establish clarity of relationship, process and expectation.
5. **Self-awareness and humility:** A person who recognises their own strengths and limitations and when to refer, e.g. to a counsellor. A person who holds the awareness that God is at the centre of the conversation and that they must step back, but who is also aware of their own worth.
6. **Able to say 'No':** A person who does not need to be needed and is aware of the dangers of mutual dependency. A person who can distinguish between being a 'soul friend' and a friend; the closeness and mutuality of friendship militates against the objectivity which is necessary for the direction relationship to serve the directee's spiritual growth.
7. **Learning:** A person who never stops being a learner ('beginner's mind') and is open to new perspectives. A person who is willing to participate in ongoing training.
8. **Discernment:** A person who enables the directee to learn the skill of discernment and exercise it themselves, primarily through modelling good discernment: a mutual process of waiting on the Holy Spirit and sharpening awareness of the moral and spiritual significance of the directee's inner processes. A person who already practises good discernment with regard to their own spiritual life.

9. **Accountable:** A person who models transparency, integrity and accountability by participating in supervision.

10. **Communion:** A person who shows awareness that the spiritual direction relationship is in service of the wider church and wider world.

11. **Difference:** A person who is able to be with otherness, variety, uniqueness and difference – e.g. gender, age, race, culture, sexuality, theology – including the recognition that to get to know another involves acknowledging ignorance, and preparedness to work at understanding another's life and experience.

12. **Openness:** A person open to the surprise of God, the freedom of the Spirit, who blows wherever [she wills].

Many of these skills are essential for all listeners, while some are particular to spiritual direction, specifically those skills relating to awareness of God in the conversation – 1, 5 and 8.

## APPENDIX 3: Second extract from *Spiritual Direction Guidelines*, published by the Retreat Association

### Section F. Good practice guidelines

It is suggested that, in respect of good practice, spiritual directors will:

- themselves be in receipt of regular spiritual direction.
- take their ongoing training and development seriously, availing themselves of opportunities to further develop their skills and understanding.
- receive regular supervision to help them reflect on and develop their practice.
- not (ordinarily) relate to the directee in a separate context (for example as a friend, colleague, minister or supervisor). This enables the directee to be free in sharing whatever they wish and the director to respond with objectivity and balance; it also avoids any confusion of roles.
- keep matters shared between the director and directee as confidential unless a legal obligation is involved. Other disclosures may be made in certain cases of serious harm in agreement with the directee.
- have knowledge of local and national legal and ethical guidelines – for example in relation to safeguarding – and abide by them.
- reflect on ongoing practice and vocation.
- ensure there is clarity about the nature of boundaries and confidentiality in the relationship.
- at all times act in a way that respects the personal and spiritual integrity and wellbeing of the directee.
- have a contingency plan in place in the event of incapacity or death.
- be informed on legal liabilities and ensure they have taken appropriate legal cover.

## **APPENDIX 4: Models of transformation in the Christian spiritual tradition**

There are several transformative models emerging from the Christian spiritual tradition that offer different language to articulate it. Examples include:

### **The Threefold Path:**

- Purgative
- Illuminative
- Unitive.

Emerging from the early church, this underlies contemplative spirituality including Orthodox and Carmelite traditions.

### **The Ignatian Spiritual Exercises:**

A development from the threefold path, the stages of the Spiritual Exercises can provide another framework. Here the four weeks are shaped in this way:

- Week 1: Centred on God's gracious love to face sin.
- Week 2: Knowing God incarnate in Jesus and discerning his call.
- Week 3: Following Jesus' passion and death.
- Week 4: Jesus' resurrection and union with God.

## APPENDIX 5: Two illustrations of course processes used in developing discerning listening

### **Model A: A programme consisting of 12 days (10am–4pm) ‘The Art of Spiritual Accompaniment’**

**Context:** Participation on this programme depends on prior completion of a programme in spiritual growth and listening.

#### **Process for developing discerning listening:**

Apart from the first and the last day, the first half of the course day is made up of these three parts:

**Part 1:** 60 minutes of prayer and reflection. A wide variety of approaches to prayer are offered. (Lectio Divina, imaginative contemplation, silent prayer, praying with art, music, poetry, walking the streets, movement.)

**Part 2:** 60–90 minutes in small groups (normally with three members) practising listening and sharing. There are two modes to this process. The first mode for the first five or so days of the programme. The second mode for the remainder. The team discern at which point the change of mode happens, based on the sense of readiness for the group to enter the second mode.

In the first mode, everyone is given space to share from their own experience of the previous hour of prayer and reflection and is listened to by the other group members in silence, without any verbal response. There are two aspects to the growth this enables. The sharing enables further reflection on their prayer, develops the ability to share personally, develops awareness of the positive effects and challenges of personal sharing (i.e. the basic dynamic of spiritual direction). The listening develops the ability to listen to another and begin to notice how deeply one can hear another person, and at the same time sharpens awareness of how many agendas can intrude on this listening e.g. wanting to know more detail, wanting to tell one’s own story, and so on.

In the second mode, a triad process is used where one person shares, one listens and responds, and one observes. The roles are rotated, enabling all to have listened, shared and observed in turn. This takes the learnings of the first stage further, particularly in the development of helpful and appropriate responses as a spiritual director and the learnings that come from this practice.

Team members will generally observe everyone in their triads at least once.

**Part 3:** 30–45 minutes in different groups that are akin to supervision groups. They can have up to six members but have no more than one member of each of the listening groups. These are facilitated by a team member and focus on the learnings and challenges being noticed in the experience of sharing and listening in the listening groups. This develops self-reflection and awareness of the value of supervision. The team member facilitating seeks to enable ongoing self-awareness in the practice of listening, as well as offering encouragement and suggestions for further growth and development.

Participants also find someone to accompany (outside of the course) and receive supervision by a tutor within the course days.

**Model B: A programme consisting of a mix of days and evenings.**

**‘Spiritual Conversation Training’ (25 evenings online and four days in person)**

**First few sessions:** Listening silently in twos and threes.

**First day session:** Introduction to triads and first go at listening in the triad process. The sharers in the triad bring material from their life and prayer for their sharing. Triads usually include a speaker, a listener, and either one or two observers. The triads are observed by a member of the team who supervises and gives feedback.

Subsequently triads take place on alternate online sessions and at every in-person day, lasting between 60 and 80 minutes. Participants will have experienced 10–12 triads through the course.

Participants are required to have two ‘practice people’ to meet with outside of course time. Supervision for this is provided as part of one-to-one tutorials, which happen about once a month.

## APPENDIX 6: A worked example of engaging with the aspects of spiritual direction

<b>Nature of spiritual direction</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Examples of Process – develops over time</b>	<b>Examples of Content – presented material</b>
<b>Holding a space</b>	Establishing an appropriately bounded space for a person to engage in the process of spiritual direction	Modelled in leadership of course, venue etc.	Ground rules for group: boundaries, beginnings, middles, ends
<b>Nurturing Relationship with God</b>	Prayer & worship as the primary intentional aspects of relating; listening to God, responding to God	Prayer and worship in programme	Theology, spirituality, traditions & spiritual practices
<b>Nurturing self-awareness</b>	Enabling self-awareness through reflection, relationships with others in group in context of relationships in society and the world community and creation	Modelled in openness to the perspectives brought by experience and awareness	MBTI/enneagram, models of personal and spiritual growth, interpersonal dynamics
<b>Listening</b>	To self and others – what are we listening to, what are we listening for?	Experiential triad work	Nature of listening, listening tools
<b>Discernment</b>	Recognition of God’s activity (in self & others)	Personal journey, triad work, supervision	Approaches to discernment, theology
<b>Responding</b>	Developing discerning responses (to self and others)  offering prayer material  awareness of range and effect of responses	Personal journey, triad work, supervision	Tools – ways of responding
<b>Ministry in the Church</b>	Discernment as corporate process, theological reflection, discerning vocation, accountability	Discernment of personal vocation, supervision	Theology, scripture, traditions
<b>In life &amp; creation (incarnate)</b>	Life lived in relation to wider community, world cultures and religions, ecology	Modelled in openness to the perspectives brought by experience and awareness of these dimensions	Spirituality and social justice, prophetic and spiritual direction, spirituality & diversity, spirituality and ecology

## APPENDIX 7: A worked example of engaging with the relationships in spiritual direction

### Understanding God

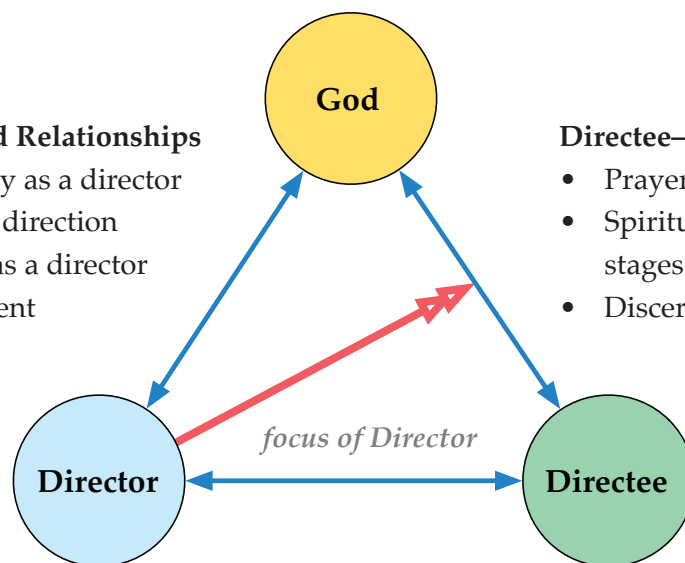
- Theology/Images of God (healthy and unhealthy)
- Nature of Grace
- Discernment

### Director–God Relationships

- Spirituality as a director
- Director's direction
- Vocation as a director
- Discernment

### Directee–God Relationships

- Prayer and Spiritual Practice
- Spiritual growth – stages / transitions
- Discernment



### Role of Director

- Intention
- Focus
- Stance
- Supports
- Dangers
- Discernment

### Director–Directee Relationships

- Psychodynamics
- Listening tools and skills
- Boundaries
- Spiritual Freedom
- Discernment

### Understanding Self

- Listening to self
- Articulating inner experience
- Personality models
- Vocation
- Discernment