

An update on the draft Guidelines for Spiritual Direction courses what progress has been made and the Discernment Process

Establishing the working party and the initial stages of the discernment process

The working party was established in 2019 at the last live Retreat Association Conference for spiritual direction trainers. With eight members from disparate regions of the country, we agreed that we would follow the principles of spiritual direction in listening carefully to each other, putting energy initially into the dual concept of a course being based both on process and content.

Three areas of discussion on the training of spiritual directors were identified and offered to the 2020 conference for comment and discussion following presentations on each. These areas were:

- Pre-requisites
- Course process and content
- Expected outcomes

This enabled a wider discussion – highlighting the fact that all three approaches were interconnected and that Guidelines were important, but courses and learning much broader.

The outcomes were discussed by the working party which continued meeting to discern, discuss and pray and to begin to draft the document. A significant part of our deliberations have been our calling to discern, develop and deepen the evolving process. We have endeavoured to find the most appropriate vocabulary and established that our working together was best described as congruent – in tune with each other and the Holy Spirit.

The aims of the Guidelines/Guidance

Originally the idea behind the Guidelines was that they should offer a tool to those already providing Spiritual Direction training that would facilitate the process of reviewing and/or revising their courses. In addition, these Guidelines would provide assistance to anyone wishing to create a new Spiritual Direction training course and who needed a starting point. As our conversations continued, we began to realise that the scope of this undertaking was far broader and deeper than we'd thought, as the requirements for those wishing to refresh their existing course might differ from those starting a course from scratch.

We also realised that there was something that felt quite prescriptive about using the word Guidelines, and began to wonder about the word Guidance instead, which feels gentler and less dogmatic. In addition, we found ourselves moving away from the use of the word training and preferring the word formation. We have been alert to the importance of language, what is being conveyed and more importantly, how it is heard and interpreted.

We have continued to reflect on how best to present structures and processes, which might assist those running Spiritual Direction courses. We have thought about how to convey the key values held with regard to best practice, formation, expectations, selection process and discernment.

We have thought about those who might wish to attend these courses – their motivation, their calling, their agenda. We have reflected on how those of other Christian traditions might not feel comfortable with the more traditional approaches to Spiritual Direction – being mindful that some Christians might feel a Director would get in the way of their direct conversation with Jesus.

We have thought about how important it is that a course should have a clear outcome, yet because this is also a charism requiring ongoing discernment, that there should be space to acknowledge that completing a course doesn't automatically mean being practice ready.

Underpinning all of this is the principle that the process of Training Spiritual Directors is congruent with the process of Spiritual Direction itself, i.e.: the experience of a formation process should be akin to the experience of receiving and delivering Spiritual Direction and does not incorporate practices that are contrary to or negating of the practice of Spiritual Direction.

We were surprised by the way the task became bigger the more we as a group thought, prayed and discerned around it. It was also a surprise to discover this is a ground-breaking activity, with few resources available that are dedicated to the training/formation of spiritual directors. We therefore could not rush the process in order to ensure that what was produced was a quality resource. We aim to offer the document to others to read and provide feedback, after more reflection and editing has taken place.

The working party is totally committed to producing a final document having included the thoughts and discernment of others who are prominent in writing, developing and leading courses on the training and formation of spiritual directors. We recognise the far-reaching effects these people will have on future generations of spiritual accompaniers.

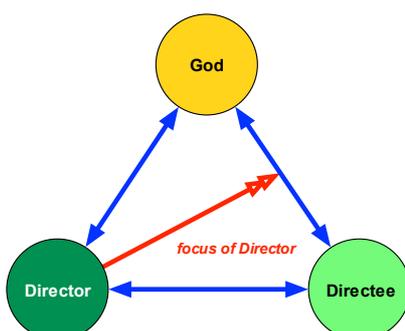
Current content of the Guidelines/Guidance

- A4 document – 24 pages so far!
- Introduction: Using the Guidance, nature of Spiritual Direction
- Exploration of Formation / training of Spiritual Directors
- Evolving a Formation Programme:
Primary Questions, Practical Questions, Process & Content, Expected outcomes,
- Appendices
- Retreat Association Spiritual Direction Guidelines
- Christian models of transformation
- Example Application form
- Worked examples in thinking through process and content

Developments over the last year

Feedback from the 2020 conference has been incorporated into the current document. In the content and process section of the Guidance, we've found that the 2 frameworks we considered at the online gathering have remained significant tools:

(1) The SD triangle of God/SD/Directee which describes the dynamics and focus within the SD space.



(2) The table outlining various aspects of the nature of SD, and for each aspect how the processes and content within a formation programme might work together and complement each other.

The feedback from the sessions on prerequisites and outcomes is also reflected in the Guidance document. So there remains a strong connection with the gathering last year.

What next steps still need to be done?

The document will need significant editing as well as the inclusion of a section on the process of developing discerning listening.

An example of where the draft Guidance has been tested

In Durham at St Antony's the team is undertaking a review of our previous course in the light of all that we've learned during the pandemic and we're developing a new course which will start in September 2022. We've been allowing this draft Guidance to help us shape our new programme. It's been particularly helpful to consider what parts of course content and processes are relevant around each of the points of the SD triangle and in the spaces between.

The Guidance is useful not because it gives a syllabus of precisely what content a programme should cover but rather it contains questions for a team developing or delivering a programme to work through together.

These include questions that:

- help us stay alive to our own sense of calling to the role
- help us examine the assumptions that shape our approach at every stage, our understanding of the nature of SD
- help us reflect on the tension between training someone in a set of skills that will enable them to do SD and forming someone in a gifting they already demonstrate to enable them to be their best spiritual director
- we can apply to all stages of the process from pre to during to completion of any course.

March 2022