

# SPIRITUAL GUIDANCE



"The essence of spiritual guidance or direction can be seen whenever one person helps another to see and respond to spiritual truth."

*(Gerald May in Care of Mind, Care of Spirit)*

## Anglican Fellowship of Prayer (Canada)

# Spiritual Guidance

## What is spiritual guidance?

All of us are on a spiritual journey, seeking the mystery of the Blessed Trinity and how, where, why and when God acts in our lives. In **Margaret Guenther's** book, *Holy Listening*, **Alan Jones** writes, "In some ways, the art of spiritual direction [guidance] lies in our uncovering the obvious in our lives and in realizing that everyday events are the means by which God tries to reach us."

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It is the sifting and sorting, listening and waiting for the movement of the Holy Spirit in a man or woman's life journey. Spiritual guidance is an intentional covenant relationship where, over a period of time, a spiritual director travels alongside another as a midwife of the soul.

**Spiritual guidance is scriptural based.** In the Old Testament we see wise people guiding others in the way of God. In the New Testament Jesus' statement "*where two or three are gathered together, there am I in the midst of them*" (*Matt 18:20*), has been an assurance to Christians of Jesus' guidance as we go through life. Spiritual guidance itself is a particular dynamic, or act of prayer, which enables those who pray to deepen their prayer lives within their own particular vocation or calling. Formal individual guidance as we know it dates from about the third century A.D.

Spiritual guidance may include what we call counselling, that is, problem solving, but it is much more than that.

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A relationship with a spiritual guide does not hinge on whether or not we have a problem.

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It is based on our mutual relationship to God and to the endeavour of discovering God's will for us and responding to it.

## **Why might we need spiritual guidance?**

No one individual has all the gifts of the Holy Spirit. We live and pray in a community of faith in which there exists a rich variety of experience, spiritual resources and discernment. Each of us needs at least one other to help us to bring to bear a certain objectivity on our spiritual lives, someone who will help us to discern where God is leading us, with whom we can test our own experience, one who may provide resources, make suggestions, and help us to develop or discard disciplines and practices. Besides any personal need we may have for spiritual guidance, we belong to a tradition of many centuries of faith and practice in which such guidance has been a normal and important aspect of lived faith. Although the art of guidance has suffered a decline among Anglicans in the past few centuries, resources are being rediscovered for which there is now a great need. A vital inner life is a necessity for busy and anxious people in our society, as it was for Christians in earlier times. Prayer is the foundation for all our life and work. Our outer life reflects our inner life, and, when our inner life is confused and poverty-stricken, we feel starved and unsatisfied in our daily living. Recognition of our spiritual needs results in efforts to find ways to fill them, a response to the Holy Spirit working in us.

## **How can we find spiritual guidance?**

There are many alternatives, and we may at different times in our lives find need for one or more of them. This section will consider briefly four possibilities:—

- ✘ a spiritual guide
- ✘ spiritual friend
- ✘ a community or group
- ✘ the Bible and other writings

**A spiritual guide** is someone who has been on the Christian journey for some time, and who has developed a firm grounding in this life and its disciplines. Such a person will be experienced in prayer and will understand the difficulties of its practice.

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Ideally, a spiritual guide does not tell  
someone what to do,

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but will help the searcher to take responsibility for her or his own life, while providing both an anchor and a sign-post. The major gift or aptitude of a spiritual guide is discernment, a gift of the Holy Spirit which enables a man or woman to assess the needs and aspirations of someone who comes for help, to communicate the assurance of God's love and care in a way which meets that person's needs, and to pray for those who are in his or her care in a self-giving way. The experienced guide not only has knowledge, but also a capacity for that wisdom which flows from self-knowledge. There is a great shortage of experienced and life-affirming guides today. It may be many months or years before we discover someone whom we wish to approach. Traditionally, the person who feels the need for guidance seeks out a wise guide; spiritual guides do not draw attention to their capacities except by making themselves available. A spiritual guide may be a woman or man, a priest, lay person, or member of a religious community.



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A relationship with a spiritual guide or a  
spiritual friend must be considered  
confidential.

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**A spiritual friend** can be someone with whom you make a mutual covenant to guide and to encourage one another in a sharing relationship. Since friends are often different in personality, these very differences enable them to provide insights for each other. Spiritual friends care about each other, pray with each other, and can share with one another their strengths and weaknesses in prayer.

**A group or community** can provide much in the way of spiritual guidance. Prayer groups and study groups which are well anchored in their Christian practice can be invaluable when they bring their experience, resources and gifts of discernment to bear on particular needs.

The religious orders, movements such as Cursillo, Alpha and Spiritual Renewal, or a parish group which meets regularly for intercessory prayer can all be sources of spiritual guidance when they consistently test their insights. Many Christians may find that a group provides the most supportive environment for their spiritual needs, and they may then require a one-to-one relationship only intermittently.

## **Personal Research**

In addition to the *Bible*, many different writings both ancient and modern have been spiritual guides for Christians. Some authors seem to speak more directly to our needs than others, provide us with food for the journey, become constant companions, are recommended to friends, and are often quoted and followed in our lived lives. Those who cannot find a spiritual director or compatible friend can join the wider circle of Christian life and thought through an author's ability to teach or to express truth in a way that reaches them.

The importance of reliable authentic writing about the inner life cannot be overestimated.

Fortunately, much that has been of value in spiritual writing in the past has not been lost, and is readily available today in our bookstores. Modern translators and editors of early writings can help us to understand and to explore so that we can identify and appropriate truths and insights from an earlier time. We often neglect to search out contemporary writers who also offer a wealth of excellent material. A short list of outstanding books will be found at the end of this booklet.

## **Discerning our needs**

It is important that we take time and trouble, and even do some experimenting with less familiar approaches in order to discover what our own particular spiritual needs are now. Certainly if we apply ourselves in a genuine attempt to follow Jesus we can expect

to find guidance, because it is the Holy Spirit who is our guide. We need never be afraid of being left without help, even in our darkest times. **Marian Dunlop** writes, "*God's will for us is to endow us with eternal life, a life so perfect in love, so unlimited in wisdom and joy, so creative of beauty that we cannot even imagine it.*" She adds that we fall into the trap of resisting God because "*we are afraid that his will is repressive, a thwarting power rather than an enabling energy . . . we even fear his will as holding something unpleasant in store for us.*" (from *Into the Light of Health*). A spiritual guide will confirm to us that God's will is to endow us with a life of beauty and creativity which includes the energy and beauty of our bodies.

A guide, friend, group or book which envisages God as repressive or punishing, and the body as something to be forced into submission, should be avoided and repudiated. In the past there have been guides and writings which have presented a negative, authoritarian and punitive approach to guidance, and unfortunately some of these writings and traditions can still be found today.

## Discipline

Discipline is important in the spiritual life, and is something we need to develop for ourselves. Spiritual discipline is not a matter of submitting to arbitrary demands for obedience, but of seeking to discover a framework within which we experience a flourishing of our spiritual lives. Some of us may need a structured approach, while others will prefer flexibility. Most of us will need different disciplines at different times; for example, retreats are very helpful to many people. Communities which offer retreats are easily accessible. (Some addresses are given at the end of this section).

Just as different plants need varying amounts of moisture, fertilizer, light and heat, and grow best in certain types of soil, so each of us will have different needs. Some plants grow fast and prolifically in sandy soil but cannot grow in clay. Some can withstand cold, others heat, some take longer than others to come to full bloom. All are different. So it



is with us, and we must take some trouble to discover our own particular needs of the spirit, what soil and climate will feed us and help us to grow.

**First steps** — if I wish for spiritual guidance, what can I do?

1. Be prepared to take some risks. Exercise some initiative in looking for help.
2. Make a list of possibilities; for example, have you a friend you can turn to who has some experience?
3. Your parish priest or minister may recommend a Spiritual Director.
4. In Canada, contact your Diocesan office for a listing of Spiritual Directors or resource personnel or the Internet.
5. Is there a group you find congenial where you could express your need?
6. Consider some of the books listed, and do not forget your Bible and a Biblical Commentary.
7. Pray that you will be led, and be on the alert for any sign or indication that a path is opening before you.
8. Keep a journal to help you to identify some of your needs or difficulties.

***Be patient!*** It may take time for you to be led to the person, group or book which will be of most help to you.





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For further information or pamphlets please contact your Diocesan Prayer  
representative or the Resources representative for A.F.P. Canada.  
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