

## **Introduction to Sacred is the Call** *by Suzanne M. Buckley*

As the ministry of spiritual direction has expanded in recent years, formation programs to support those called to this vocation have grown rapidly. Because the call to spiritual direction is indeed sacred, this book explores formation programs as journeys of faith. The authors, all spiritual directors with years of experience in designing respected programs, share their wisdom concerning this journey through reflection, commentary, and guidance. Their essays include the core assumptions of formation programs, methods of presentation, the basic topics presented, and questions to consider for “opening up” those topics.

*Sacred Is the Call* presents an overview of essential program topics. Exploring these topics supports the formation process by enabling participants to move to a deeper level, resulting in a profound experience of personal maturity, freedom, and transformation. This, the authors and I believe, is the space in which we all must reside if we are truly to “tend the Holy.”

The material presented here offers a model for formation programs to use in planning their courses; it also supports those already engaged in this work. The text is designed to be a practical help to program staff as well as to be used as class material. With that in mind, the chapters are divided into four sections. Each section contains topics that build upon each other to create a flow of information, exploration, and experience. Each chapter supports a particular theme through theory, examples, research, or practical teaching approaches. Each chapter is followed by questions for further discussion to use with groups and staff, and additional resources for further study.

The first section, **Awareness of the Presence**, reflects the assumption that authentic formation programs are always grounded in the human experience of God. Foundational to the study of spiritual direction, the essays in this section provide the starting point for an organic evolution of awareness, learning, and application of that assumption. James Neafsey reminds us that our work as human beings is to wake up to the mystery of God’s presence and action in all human experience. He considers how this holy work leads to programs that support the formation of spiritual directors who can ground these abstract truths in their lives and help others to do the same.

Understanding the theory and practice of spiritual direction, Rose Mary Dougherty suggests, leads us to acknowledge spiritual direction as an act of prayer. Her profoundly simple essay provides an intentional framework for our own experience of spiritual direction. Maria Tattu Bowen presents us with a beautiful reflection on the nature of contemplation and introduces the notion that spiritual direction is contemplative listening. Joseph D. Driskill examines the

essential role of prayer in spiritual direction, both in the lives of director and directee, as well as in the direction session itself. Mary Ann Scofield looks at the importance of the process of discernment in the ministry of spiritual direction and provides concrete examples of listening to and responding to the experience of God in the life of a directee. She concludes the section with an essay introducing the notion of resistance and its importance in recognizing the blocks and fears that stand in the way of deeper awareness, which allows us to be more present to oneself, others and the Holy One.

In the second section, **Open to the Mystery**, we investigate topics that support spiritual directors as they listen to the varieties of human experience. These subjects are staples of authentic formation programs, and provide direction in exploring human spiritual and psychological development. James Neafsey guides us to an understanding of the stages of prayer life as expressed in the writings of Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, still vibrant and helpful to a director today. Patricia Coughlin puts forward some important ideas about the components best covered in programs that carefully present the fluid boundaries between psychological and spiritual aspects of the human journey. Donald Bisson provides a framework for consideration of gender issues in the formation of directors, while James M. Bowler offers a critical lens for viewing the stages of adult spiritual development. Lucy Abbott Tucker invites us to deep listening through the wisdom of the body, and Sandra Lommasson focuses on the important role of sexuality in the process of direction.

The third section, "Grounded in the Real" describes several elements of formation programs that provide challenges for staff and participants alike. Interns in spiritual direction programs are not only recipients of knowledge; they must apply their learning and receive additional instruction through ongoing supervision. Program participants are also guided in the accepted ethical norms for the ministry. James M. Keegan provides a realistic reflection on the psychological dynamics existing in the supervision practicum. Sandra Lommasson enlightens us on the topic of dual relationships; when interns begin to work with directees in communities of faith, the complexity of boundary issues surface. Bill Creed's essay calls those in the ministry to move from compassionate listening to compassionate justice; he outlines the areas of moral responsibility involved in the spiritual direction conversation.

The final section, **Evolution: Moving with the Spirit**, provides an invitation to incorporate some new topics in formation programs as a response to the prophetic nature of the ministry of spiritual direction. The authors cover both the broader movement of the Holy Spirit as we pay attention to where this ministry is leading us, and the personal challenge to all those involved in formation programs as the parameters of spiritual direction expand globally, across faith traditions, to new generations, and to what we call "the margin."

Donald Bisson urges formation programs to provide a place for discernment of call to those on the margins. He provides some guidelines to help staff and programs move their participants from self-care to care of the world soul. Sandra Lommasson challenges programs to “widen the tent” by encompassing the ways in which the Spirit crosses traditional faith boundaries without sacrificing deep rootedness in a particular tradition. Bill Creed advocates for the new generation of spiritual directors and reveals the gifts and concerns of the young adults who will follow us in this ministry. Janice Farrell provides a graced and practical guide for planning and developing a variety of models of group spiritual direction, which she sees as an answer to a deep need and hunger for hope, joy, and love whose source is in God.

The last word belongs to Mary Ann Scofield, who has been so instrumental in moving the discussion of this ministry to the global arena. Mary Ann reminds us of the prophetic nature of spiritual direction and the challenge of seeing the world the way God sees it. As our spiritual lives develop through formation and work as directors, God’s love is poured into our hearts until we find that others’ joys and sorrows literally become our own. She suggests that our deeper relationship with God moves us, willingly or not, into standing with the poor and working against the unjust structures of our world.

We believe that the true impact of a spiritual direction formation program is not simply the real personal growth that can take place in the participants. As those in spiritual direction programs awaken to the mystery of God’s presence and action in all human experience, they reach out to help others recognize the work of the Sacred in their lives. The experience of personal transformation moves program participants to use their gifts at the compassionate service of their families, churches, and communities. They provide direction to others, start prayer groups, lead retreats, and take leadership roles in their faith communities. Others teach Centering Prayer to the incarcerated, serve the destitute in nations ranging from Australia to Zambia, work with elderly, ill, and marginalized people of all ages and types; and develop programs to serve Hispanics and the rural poor. The Spirit has called them. By their fruits you shall know them.

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