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Code of Ethics

For Spiritual Directors

Spiritual direction is a ministry with a rich history in the Christian church.

While other ethical codes have been written to address spiritual direction as practiced across a number of religious contexts, the Evangelical Spiritual Directors Association (ESDA) has chosen to compose a set of ethical guidelines intended for use specifically by Christian spiritual directors. This is because our understanding of the ministry of spiritual direction is rooted directly and deeply in our Christian beliefs.

Christian spiritual direction is primarily a ministry in which one Christian (the director) helps another (the directee) to discern God's presence and activity in the directee's life and also the directee's reactions and responses to God's activity.

It is often said that the real director in spiritual direction is God, while the human spiritual director is more of a witness, one that points to God's activity on behalf of the directee.

Spiritual direction can also be done in a group context, in which a group of Christians together prayerfully seek to discern God's activity in the life of a fellow believer. For the purposes of these guidelines, we will be focusing primarily on the more traditional form of one-to-one spiritual direction.

At ESDA, we feel it is wise to give additional context for this important ministry.

When we refer to God, we mean the Triune God as He reveals Himself in the Bible: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God's activity is based on His character as revealed in Scripture and grounded in the redemptive work of the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross.

Spiritual direction involves reflecting on how the Father, Son and indwelling Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ are transforming a believer into Christlikeness and how a believer is responding or not responding to God's invitations for the believer to participate in that process (Romans 5:1-5, Romans 8:26-30).



An ethical spiritual director is always seeking to have healthy and appropriate relationships with others, including God, oneself, one's directees, and others in the community and the world.

Love is our highest calling and command (Matthew 22:36-40) and all other ethical considerations should flow from this main principle. However, in any personal interaction where one person possesses training and experience in an area that another does not, there is an imbalance of power that makes both parties vulnerable to risk: the risk of abusing that power and of being abused.

By outlining the following ethical guidelines, we seek to help spiritual directors to behave appropriately in their ministry, to recognize and to be prepared for ethical situations that may arise, and to consider the condition of their own deceptive hearts (Jeremiah 17:9) as they seek to practice this ministry of love.

The Spiritual Director's Relationship with God

Spiritual directors' first responsibility is to their relationship with God (Deuteronomy 6:5, Matthew 22:37).

Spiritual directors come to offer the ministry of spiritual direction through a sense of calling, affirmed by their faith community, and they only continue in this ministry as that calling persists. They first experience spiritual direction for themselves, then seek training in this ministry and strive to ever increase their knowledge and skills to the betterment of their ministry.

Spiritual directors take great care to attend to their own spiritual life with God, through prayer, worship and the regular exercise of communal life in the Body of Christ. Spiritual directors seek to worship and honor God in all they do and seek to participate in their personal growth in Christlikeness as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

They continue to grow in their knowledge and understanding of God through prayer, worship, Bible study, and other disciplines, as well as through courses in theology, church history, spiritual practices, and other areas that relate to their faith and ministry.

Christian spiritual directors seek to be grounded in the foundational truths of the Christian faith and to exercise their ministry within that context.

Spiritual directors consider theirs a ministry to God's church and to those seeking a relationship with God.

Therefore, spiritual directors attempt to discern what is best for each particular directee considering what is most helpful for one's growth, be it traditional discipleship practices, a deepening participation in classic spiritual exercises or referral to other helping ministries.



Spiritual directors remember that their directees' spiritual lives are directed first and foremost by God and they seek to follow His leading in their directees' lives, not imposing their own ideas of what should be done or should happen.

Spiritual directors exercise their ministry in the awareness of God's redemptive presence, anchored in His Word.

Since directees are coming to spiritual direction to meet firstly with God, the true Director, spiritual directors consider the time and space with a directee to be sacred – a reverent place to encounter the living God – and therefore honor the experience with appropriate preparation, atmosphere, consideration, care and boundaries.

The Spiritual Director's Relationship to Self

Spiritual directors recognize that they are limited creatures and are not themselves God.

Therefore, they seek to be aware of, respect and heed their own personal needs and boundaries. Spiritual directors are diligent to have their personal, interpersonal and relational needs met outside of direction relationships so that they do not expect directees to meet those needs, even unconsciously.

They are also careful not to take on too many directees, making sure there is sufficient space in their life to properly attend to each directee, themselves, and their life responsibilities.

Spiritual directors remember that they themselves, like their directees, are fellow sheep following their Shepherd on the journey to God's heavenly Kingdom. Therefore, they themselves receive regular spiritual direction, continue faithfully in their practices of prayer and spiritual disciplines, and participate in a church body.

Additionally, spiritual directors regularly obtain supervision and consultation for their spiritual direction work. They do this in order to identify areas of weakness, fear, and prejudice of which they may be unaware so that they are not deceived regarding appropriate care for self and others.

Spiritual directors seek personal spiritual and emotional maturity. While we cannot reach perfection in this lifetime, spiritual directors seek a level of emotional health marked by their ability to safely be with another and simultaneously keep personal boundaries, as well as being able to contain strong emotions.

Spiritual directors also attend to their own physical health. They acknowledge how illness and stress can affect their ability to be fully present with a directee and so tend to their physical bodies.



Should spiritual directors find that their own needs are demanding a large amount of their energy and attention or are distracting them from the direction process, they respectfully remove themselves from giving direction until that season of their lives has concluded. Consultation is often involved in this process.

Additionally, spiritual directors are aware of their strengths and their limitations in their ministry and therefore maintain a list of others who may provide better help to a directee than they can – such as other spiritual directors, therapists, pastors, or other ministries to which they can refer a directee.

The Spiritual Director's Relationship to Directees

Spiritual directors seek to meet the Lord's second greatest commandment when working with directees – to love one's neighbor as oneself (Matthew 22:39).

Spiritual directors seek to minister in accordance with God's love for their directees and how He is manifesting His love in their lives. Spiritual direction is a prayerful ministry and directors pray regularly for their directees throughout the course of the direction relationship.

Spiritual directors respect each person as made in God's image and treat each person that comes seeking direction with appropriate dignity and care.

Spiritual directors may choose to refer a potential directee to work with someone else due to their own personal limitations – such as limiting close relations with the other gender; lack of experience in one's specific religious background or interests; or age, language and cultural limitations. The director will do their best to help a directee find an appropriate person with whom to work.

At the onset of a direction relationship, a spiritual director makes clear a covenant or agreement with the directee, either written or verbally, which outlines the boundaries of their relationship.

This covenant should indicate how spiritual direction differs from other helping ministries – such as psychotherapy, pastoral counseling and mentoring – and make clear other aspects of what the directee can expect during the direction relationship, including but not limited to: potential for referral; scheduling meeting length, times and location; under which ethical guidelines one works; compensation (if any); guidelines for confidentiality; and the process for evaluating and terminating the relationship.



Spiritual directors are clear about keeping in confidence anything a directee shares in a session, including a directee's identity.

What is shared by a directee in the sacred space of a direction session should be treated as holy and cherished. Any written material regarding a session should likewise be kept secure.

With the directee's knowledge, a spiritual director should only share content from a direction session for purposes of supervision and/or consultation, which should also be held in strictest confidence by all participants. A spiritual director takes great care to protect a directee's privacy and dignity.

However, if a directee shares information regarding physical harm to oneself or another, a spiritual director should intervene by contacting the appropriate authorities with the directee's knowledge.

Some spiritual directors might additionally be in roles where local law holds them to an even stricter standard as mandated reporters of abuse. [1] Should this be the case, they should communicate these additional standards clearly to their directees at the onset of their relationship.

Every interaction with a directee is a kind of cross cultural encounter – no one but God is an expert on anyone's spiritual life.

Spiritual directors approach their directees' experiences with honor and are not quick to assume they understand the exact meaning behind a directee's words or expressions. Likewise, spiritual directors do not pry unnecessarily into the personal life of a directee. In some other helping relationships, such as psychotherapy, dual or multiple roles with clientele are to be strictly avoided.

However, while spiritual directors should also be mindful to avoid dual or multiple roles with their directees as much as possible, sometimes such overlapping roles are unavoidable. In those circumstances, spiritual directors do their best to consider what limits to make on such additional roles in order to keep the direction relationship a safe and sacred place for the directee.

Of special note, care should also be taken regarding engaging with directees through internet social networking sites.

Should any circumstances arise that threaten the integrity of the direction relationship, spiritual directors remove themselves from those circumstances or from the direction relationship itself. Customarily, face-to-face interaction with directees is preferred and non-face-to-face contact is used with wise additional caution and care.



Spiritual directors acknowledge that there is a power differential in a spiritual direction relationship and they take efforts to limit the effects this has on the direction relationship.

Directors are mindful to keep good psychological boundaries and are careful to note and dispel instances of transference and countertransference.

Spiritual directors are careful about any physical touch that may take place between them and the directee, and they always keep appropriate physical boundaries.

Spiritual directors refrain from engaging with a directee in any sexualizing, abusive, manipulative or coercive behavior, whether that includes language or actions. Eroticized thoughts regarding the directee may naturally arise, and they indicate an invitation for consultation and supervision.

Relationships change overtime, and spiritual directors are always considering the state of their relationships with directees and discerning if it is appropriate to continue.

Should the direction relationship change over time into something more mutual, spiritual directors discuss this with their directees and graciously terminate the formal direction relationship.

The Spiritual Director's Relationship to the Society

Spiritual directors continue to act out the second greatest commandment (Matthew 22:39) in relation to their fellow spiritual directors, colleagues in the other helping ministries and society at large.

Spiritual directors maintain collegial relationships within and across disciplines and refrain from disparaging others. Spiritual directors seek to support one another, value collegial sharing and assist one another in bettering their ministries.

If a directee is in therapy, a spiritual director respects that pre-existing relationship and asks the directee to inform the therapist of the concurrent direction relationship.

Spiritual directors represent themselves appropriately in public. They do not misrepresent their qualifications or affiliations. Spiritual directors remember that their ministry is a gift of God and not a commodity to be exploited.

Spiritual directors respect and honor all persons in society regardless of age, race, ethnicity, color, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, religion, disability, marital status, political belief, any personal characteristic, attribute, condition or status.

We hope that this code of ethics provides not only helpful behavioral guidelines, but also a vision of how love can be a guide in the many relationships involved in spiritual direction.



We hope that spiritual directors will take the time to regularly review and pray over these guidelines, allowing the Holy Spirit to shine His light of truth and wisdom on their ministry.

While there may be times when we will fall short of these standards, let us all return again and again to the throne of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, where we may find grace and mercy to receive us and guide us in this ministry of love (Hebrews 4:14-16).

1 Mandated reporters are individuals who are obligated by law to report suspected cases of child abuse and neglect. Laws regarding mandated reporters vary from state to state.

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