

SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

WITH

Kristen Leigh Mitchell, M.Div.

What is spiritual direction?

Spiritual direction is a unique form of companionship in which a trained guide accompanies a person on some part of their life journey, in order to help them more faithfully embody their inner sense of purpose by strengthening the connection between their core values and beliefs, their spiritual experiences, their communal practices, and their everyday lives.

What happens in spiritual direction?

While the specific topics and questions may vary, the process of spiritual direction seeks to deepen faith through conversation, listening, reflection, and guided meditations or prayer. Spiritual direction ultimately equips participants with the tools for *discernment*, which is the ancient art of learning to listen humbly and deeply, amidst all the other voices we encounter on a daily basis, for the wisdom that invites us to grow continually into a more holistic and embodied sense of who we are.

APPROACH

While many contemporary models of spiritual direction seek to replicate a “clinical” atmosphere, my approach is rooted in the living faith tradition of Christianity, and the monastic communities out of which the practice actually emerged. Within this context, spiritual direction can be a relaxed, friendly, and interactive style of relationship, albeit one that is characterized by clarity of roles, intentional encounters, and contemplative listening.

CONVERSATIONAL

Some schools of thought in spiritual direction encourage a more passive listening style marked by limited interaction, while others find that a more conversational style helps them to feel more fully seen and heard. I lean more towards the latter approach, recognizing that spiritual wisdom often emerges through the process of raw dialogue. However, I also seek to be flexible in adjusting my listening posture around the needs of the individual and the moment, always with the goal of helping others begin to slow down and listen inwardly for the movement of the Holy Spirit.

CONTEXTUAL

My training in social theory provides a lens through which I understand the significant impact that social structures and cultural frameworks can have on our sense of self, especially in relation to spirituality and religion. Experiences of race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender identity, relative class status, disability, mental illness, and neurodivergence can all shape our relationships with others in ways that significantly impact how we see ourselves in relation to God, and how we may hear or interpret certain kinds of religious language. I strive to be aware of any unspoken power dynamics in the room as I seek to create a safe space that respects the dignity and belovedness of every human being.

DEVELOPMENTAL

My training is rooted in a developmental model that assumes every human person is on a journey of self-discovery and maturing into self-awareness throughout the entire course of their lifetime. This framework acknowledges that people hold different kinds of questions at different life stages, and have different levels of “readiness” for certain kinds of insights and learning at different times. My model is non-linear, informed by Internal Family Systems (IFS), which understands that our psyches are made up of different “parts” that may be at different stages in any given time. I do not believe that anyone – including myself – has achieved spiritual enlightenment, nor do I believe that “advancing” is the goal of the spiritual life. Rather, I believe that all people, at every stage of life, are being called by their questions into a deeper understanding of themselves, one another, and God.

TRAUMA INFORMED

The work of clinical researchers like Judith Herman and Edith Shiro, along with my graduate studies in psychology and religion, have informed my understanding of trauma as it relates to spirituality more broadly, and to the formation of the Christian faith tradition in particular. Additionally, I have worked through my own healing from complex trauma in the aftermath of narcissistic abuse, and am especially attuned to the unconscious postures that victims often unwittingly develop due to prolonged exposure to certain relational conditions. I will always encourage anyone impacted by trauma, mental illness, or acute grief to connect with a licensed clinical mental health practitioner in order to ensure they are getting the support they need as they journey towards recovery and resilience.

OPTIONS

FOCUS & THEMES

One of the primary differences between spiritual direction and other forms of psychological and spiritual care is its open-ended orientation towards the movement of Holy Spirit. In spiritual direction, we are not necessarily working towards a specific goal or outcome, but learning to become more and more attentive to the deeper patterns of our lives, which can reveal how God is already moving in, through, with, and around us.

While my practice reflects this open-ended orientation, I prefer to walk with people through particular seasons of their lives that are centered on certain questions, themes, or areas of focus. This focal point will help to ground our conversations and provide a reference point for recognizing growth. We can work together during our initial meeting to discern what you most need in this season. Some common themes might include:

- Discernment of call, vocation, or life purpose
- Developing an authentic and sustainable prayer practice
- Processing doubts, conversions, or questions about your faith
- Learning a new spiritual practice or exploring a theological question
- Approaching faith after past experiences of spiritual or religious harm
- Connecting your personal spirituality with communal religious practice

FREQUENCY OF SESSIONS (3 OPTIONS)

In order to meet the needs of diverse individuals in different seasons of life, I offer three options for frequency of sessions:

- **SHORT-TERM FOCUSED: 1-3 sessions over 1-2 months**

This model is designed for those who wish to receive individual instruction about a specific spiritual practice, one-on-one guidance about the Enneagram, or help working through a particular theological question or issue in a very focused way. This timeframe can also be helpful for those who are in an intense period of discernment or reflection, like an extended sabbatical, or the weeks leading up to a major transition or life decision.

- **SHORT-TERM PRACTICE: 4-6 sessions over 3-4 months**

This model is best for those who want to devote a season of practice to developing a regular and sustainable rhythm of prayer that supports them in their ongoing work of discernment and connection with God. This timeframe can also be helpful for those who want to work through a particular theological question or issue at a slower pace that invites deeper reflection.

- **LONG-TERM PRACTICE: every 3-4 weeks in 6-month intervals**

I offer long-term spiritual direction in 6-month intervals in order to provide clear markers for reflecting on our time together, and natural stopping points for discerning the eventual discontinuation of sessions. Check-ins for those who wish to continue will include a reassessment of needs in order to move forward with deeper insight and renewed focus.

MEETING LOCATIONS

I have a library and a screen porch at my home that are both designed for meeting with people in spiritual direction. I am also open to meeting in "third spaces" (i.e. a park, church, library, or coffeeshop) for those who would feel more comfortable in a semi-public setting. Some may find it helpful to engage in an activity while we talk (i.e. knitting, coloring, or doodling); others may prefer to walk during sessions rather than sitting still. There is access to the Eno River trail system just a few feet from my house, or I could meet you at any local trail head or walking path of your choice.

RESOURCES

BODY: SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

The historical lineage of contemplative Christianity offers a variety of spiritual disciplines and other embodied practices of prayer, to help deepen our relationship with God and hone our ability to hear to the still, small voice within. As someone who has struggled with both ADHD and anxiety, I greatly appreciate how important it is to develop a regular and sustainable prayer practice, while also understanding the need to adapt certain practices in order to realistically translate them into modern, everyday life. I am happy to introduce any of the following spiritual disciplines, and help you find creative ways to build your own repertoire of embodied connection with God:

Praying the Hours/the Daily Office	Centering Prayer/Silent Meditation
<i>Lectio Divina</i> (devotional study)	Praying with Icons
Ignatian Spiritual Exercises	Creative Arts practice
Rosary/Prayer Beads	Labyrinth/Walking Meditation
The Jesus Prayer	Fasting (<i>not dieting!</i>)

MIND: THEOLOGICAL QUESTIONS

Some spiritual teachers advise against engaging the intellect (or any kind of critical thinking, for that matter) in the context of spiritual practice. Too much “analysis,” it is thought, can be a stumbling block to deeper levels of emotional self-awareness. While this is sometimes the case, many people find that their rational questions about God and religion are the most logical place to start. Curiosity and matters of conscience are both vital parts of the embodied spiritual life, shaping the contours of our journey in ways we don’t always fully understand. I believe that when engaged honestly, our theological questions can point us in the direction of deeper wisdom.

I love engaging with people’s intellectual questions, and connecting them with books, articles, and other resources that respond to their specific concerns. Sometimes it just helps to know that we are not alone! Toward this end, I have created a library in my home that contains many well-known and historic texts in spirituality, psychology, philosophy, theology, biblical studies, church history, religious anthropology, and cultural studies, all of which are available to borrow. Please know that any recommendations I make are always just that... suggestions! I do not assign “homework” in spiritual direction (unless I am explicitly asked to do so).

HEART: ENNEAGRAM WORK

The Enneagram can be a powerful tool for emotional self-awareness, rooted in both ancient wisdom and contemporary psychology. While many of the standard personality typing systems, such as the Myers-Briggs, are organized around our conscious preferences and habits, the Enneagram is rooted in a developmental framework that looks at our unconscious ego formation, revealing patterns of relational orientation that are so deeply ingrained, we usually fail to recognize them in ourselves.

I was introduced to the Enneagram system in 2006 (long before it was trendy!), by Fr. William Meninger of Spencer Abbey and the teachers at the Servant Leadership School, who were trained by Claudio Naranjo and Helen Palmer, respectively. While knowing your Enneagram type is certainly not required for spiritual direction, I will often recommend it as a way to establish a more comprehensive foundation for the process of spiritual growth. I can walk most people through the system and the process of discerning their type in 1-2 sessions.

POLICIES

Spiritual direction creates an asymmetrical relationship that results in an unavoidable power dynamic. It is always important for those in positions of power to acknowledge this role differential, and to articulate a code of conduct to which they may be held accountable. The following guidelines are ones that I seek to maintain in accordance with the widely-accepted SDI guidelines and ethical procedures for spiritual directors worldwide.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Anything shared with me in the context of a spiritual direction session will be held in strict confidence. You are free to share whatever you like about our conversations with others, but I will not reveal the content of our conversations with anyone unless you give me explicit permission to do so, nor will I bring up sensitive content shared within our meetings during any casual interactions we may have outside of spiritual direction. Exceptions to this would be in cases of mandatory reporting: NC law requires that I report any suspected instances of abuse, neglect, or mistreatment of children, disabled adults, or the elderly.

DUAL RELATIONSHIPS

Dual relationships occur in spiritual direction when relational encounters outside the context of our meetings have the potential to confuse or disrupt roles or expectations during our meetings (or vice versa). While it is vitally important to understand that *spiritual direction is not therapy*, I try to be mindful of all my interactions with directees, hoping to embody a certain quality of care and attentiveness in all the interactions I have with the people with whom I've worked in spiritual direction. It is my policy not to do spiritual direction with anyone who is a family member, a close friend, or an active work colleague. I do, however, offer spiritual direction to members of congregations that I attend and work with, including the church where my husband serves as a priest. In the case of the latter, it will be important to discuss expectations and preferred boundaries with regard to communication and confidentiality between me as your spiritual director and Joe+ as your priest and pastor.

THIS IS NOT THERAPY (OR COACHING)!

Because my spiritual direction practice has been deeply informed by social psychology, depth psychology, and trauma studies, I may introduce certain psychoanalytic frameworks or clinical resources during our work together. However, it is important to understand that **spiritual direction is not therapy**. I am neither qualified nor licensed to diagnose or treat any mental or emotional health disorder, nor am I able to provide the ongoing kind of mental health support needed for those struggling with acute anxiety, depression, grief, or untreated mental illness.

Similarly, while I may offer a variety of tools for self-awareness and personal growth (particularly in the case of vocational discernment), spiritual direction is not "coaching." Our conversations are not meant to help you achieve success in any arena, nor do I offer step-by-step programs for specific self-improvement or wellness goals. Any decisions you may make based on conversations we have in spiritual direction are yours and yours alone.

PRAYER

I make an intentional effort to pray for the questions and concerns held by the people I sit with in spiritual direction. Please let me know if there is anything specific that you want me to pray about. Also, please don't hesitate to ask if you have questions about how I understand and approach prayer, or what I mean when I say that I will "pray for you."

COMPENSATION

I do not currently charge a “fee” for spiritual direction, because I do not wish to approach my practice as a transactional service, nor do I ever want cost to be a barrier for anyone seeking conversational space for spiritual reflection and discernment.

That said, I **gratefully accept donations** from those who wish to contribute to my practice. Donations allow me to continue offering spiritual direction at no cost to those who would not otherwise be able to afford it. Paying for sessions can also provide some participants with a helpful sense of structure, accountability, and agency. For those who feel more comfortable paying for sessions, I offer two different sliding-scale models for how to think about what a fair exchange value for my time would be. Please let me know if you would like to set up a regular fee structure or a one-time donation, and we can talk through the logistics in person.

CANCELLATION & DISCONTINUATION

Life happens! Please don't worry if you need to cancel, just let me know as far in advance as possible so that I can reschedule my time. If cancelling or missing sessions becomes a pattern, we may need to discuss whether spiritual direction is a good fit for you at this time.

Please know that you are always free at any time, for any reason, to decide you no longer want to schedule any further spiritual direction meetings with me. It is totally up to you how much you are getting out of our sessions and how long you want to continue. Ideally it is helpful to have a final meeting to provide some closure. For those engaged in long-term practice, the 6-month breaks are built in to provide an opportunity for mutual discernment about whether to continue. Because spiritual direction is just one of the many hats I wear, I may discern during a check-in period that I need to discontinue meetings for a time in order to focus on other work priorities. If/when this is the case, I will always make every effort to connect you with another spiritual director who is compatible with your needs and interests.

ONLINE SESSIONS

Because of my belief in the importance of embodied presence and mimetic relational practice in the context of spiritual formation and human development, I no longer offer regular spiritual direction online. For the sake of convenience, I can offer online sessions in the case of illness, travel, or other extenuating circumstances. But my goal is for the majority of our sessions to be in person. If you need to switch to an online session for any reason, please let me know as far in advance as possible, and I will do my best to accommodate you.

COMMUNICATION & SOCIAL MEDIA

You are welcome to communicate with me via email, text, or phone call to schedule sessions, ask a question, or update me on how things are going between sessions. Please let me know your preferred form of communication and I will make every effort to abide by it. While I may occasionally forward you an article, question, or suggestion between sessions, I will never attempt to conduct a spiritual direction conversation with you via text. Please save any deep, personal, or sensitive content for our next in-person meeting.

I maintain a public presence on social media, with pages on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Pinterest, and Substack, where I engage with diverse followers from all over the world on culturally controversial topics. You are welcome to follow me on any of my public pages, and to engage with any of my posts, but please keep in mind that my pages are very public, and I do not monitor my comment feeds regularly. Comment at your own risk, and know that I will never discuss personal or sensitive content from spiritual direction sessions online, nor will I conduct sessions through the messaging feature of any social media platform.

BACKGROUND

EDUCATION & TRAINING

- 2000-2004 B.A. Communication Studies
University of North Carolina at Greensboro
- 2010-2014 M.Div., Theological Aesthetics
Union Theological Seminary in NYC
- 2020-2022 Spiritual Direction & Formation Certification Program
San Francisco Theological Seminary at University of Redlands

FAITH TRADITION

I am an ecumenical Christian whose faith has been shaped by Protestant, Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox clergy, teachers, and mentors. I currently practice Christianity as a devoted member of the Episcopal Church. My spiritual and theological perspective has been deeply informed by the desert fathers and mothers of ancient Syria and Egypt, the early Christian bishops of Byzantium and Rome, the medieval monastics of Western Europe, the liturgical architects of Anglicanism, the pragmatic spirit of the Methodists, the discernment models of the Jesuits and the Quakers, and the lived Christian witness of more recent figures like Howard Thurman, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Dorothy Day, Oscar Romero, Dorothee Sölle, Henri Nouwen, Barbara Holmes, and Parker Palmer.

SOCIAL & RELIGIOUS CONTEXT

It was born and raised in a diverse, working-class neighborhood in Greensboro, NC, to a family with Midwestern and Northeastern roots. From a young age, I was exposed to a variety of different cultures and faith traditions – among my closest friends growing up were Irish Catholics, Black Baptists, Japanese Buddhists, and Korean Presbyterians. My parents hopped around between different mainline Protestant churches, so I was baptized in a Presbyterian church, attended preschool in an Episcopal church, and was confirmed in a Methodist church. But I was not raised with any kind of religious indoctrination or enforced religious practice. Instead, I was encouraged to engage with religion thoughtfully, critically, and reverently.

As an adolescent, I became interested in Taoism and neopaganism, and in college I studied comparative religious anthropology alongside my degree in social psychology, with a particular interest in Buddhism, Hinduism, and indigenous North American traditions. I spent most of my teens and early twenties immersed in the local arts and music scene as a singer, songwriter, and drummer in an indie punk band. Like most of my friends at the time, I was a rather snarky agnostic with a particular disdain for the Reformed-capitalist expressions of Christianity that dominated cultural life in the American South.

In 2005, I shocked everyone I knew by becoming a follower of Jesus after a life-changing encounter with the living God on a North Carolina beach. The sincere faith commitment I made that day has guided my journey ever since, sustaining a lifelong quest to discern what it means to live more fully into my own Christian witness. Since then, my travels have allowed me to learn from, and pray with, Christians of every kind from all over the world – Greek, Romanian, Coptic, and Ethiopian Orthodox Christians, Roman Catholics from Ireland to Italy to Indonesia, Moravians, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, Anabaptists, Quakers, indigenous Christians, and people identifying as Christian Muslims, Jewish Christians, Christ-following Hindus, Catholic Buddhists, and Christian atheists. I seek to honor the living apostolic faith tradition, while appreciating the careful and creative cross-cultural negotiations that each person makes in their own unique encounters with religion and spirituality.