



THE DIOCESE OF
CYPRUS AND THE GULF
THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH IN
JERUSALEM AND THE MIDDLE EAST

Forging spiritual friendships –

first steps towards the ministry of spiritual direction

Here we explore the idea and practice of spiritual friendship, which might whet the appetite for some form of spiritual direction and indeed draw out from among us latent gifts in spiritual direction/ accompaniment. What does the Bible say? What is the need for this? We look at a suggested pattern, the art of contemplative listening; necessary disciplines and boundaries; do's and don'ts, opportunities and pitfalls...

Introduction

These days, the word 'friends' often gets devalued. Aside from the excellent comedy by that name, (which might give us useful clues about friendship), we see the term used on social media – where such a relationship might be 'a mile wide and an inch deep.'

But as Christians, as pilgrims on a journey, we need spiritual friends who can support us and cheer us on our way, and to whom we can offer such encouragement.

Throughout the Scriptures we find inspiring examples of how spiritual friendships transform and deepen our life in God. Who can you recall?

We remember, for example, the remarkable friendship and depth of sharing between David and Jonathan, Jesus with John the beloved disciple, Mary, Martha and Lazarus; Peter and Mark; Paul and Timothy.

The visitation of Mary to Elizabeth provides a powerful model. See Luke 1:39–56.

Mary makes the effort – a long journey to the hill country of Judea – to share with Elizabeth. She puts into words her experience of the divine, her encounter with the

angel (in the annunciation) and her sense of being called by God – her unfolding vocation. She pours forth both her fears and her hopes. Elizabeth listens attentively and offers great affirmation: ‘Blessed are you among women...Blessed is she who believed’. It is a deep sharing, represented by the babes in the wombs greeting each other and the length of the conversation (3 months!). It is an encounter and depth of meeting enabled both by human openness and transparency and by the Holy Spirit (1:42). Mary concludes with a declaration of her faith who turns things upside down and fulfils his promises, in the praises of the Magnificat.

Throughout the history of the Church examples abound: Gregory Nazianzen and Basil; Jerome and Paula; Augustine and Monica; Benedict and Scholastica, Francis and Clare; Bernard of Clairvaux and his brother; Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross; Jane of Chantal and Francis de Sales....so why not us, in our day?

What does Scripture say of such friendships?

Faithful friends are a sturdy shelter:

 whoever finds one has found a treasure.

Faithful friends are beyond price;

 no amount can balance their worth.

Faithful friends are life-saving medicine;

 and those who fear the Lord will find them.

Those who fear the Lord direct their friendship aright,

 for as they are, so are their neighbours also. (Ecclesiasticus 6:14-17)

A friend loves at all times (Proverbs 17:17)

How wonderful and pleasant it is

 when brothers and live together in harmony!

For harmony is as precious as the anointing oil

 that was poured over Aaron’s head,

 that ran down his beard

 and onto the border of his robe.

Harmony is as refreshing as the dew from Mount Hermon

 that falls on the mountains of Zion.

And there the LORD has pronounced his blessing,

 even life everlasting. (Ps 133, NLB)

Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.’ (Matt 18:20)

The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!" (Matt 11:19)

I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. (John 15:15)

Let the Holy Spirit guide your lives... the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control...If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another... Share each other's burdens, and in this way obey the law of Christ. (Galatians 5: 16, 22-26, 6:2 NLT)

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.... (Phil 2:1-5)

Isaac the Syrian (seventh century)

Indeed, if there are one or two persons who seek this mystery of spiritual converse [prayer], and they meet together with one another once a week, while quietly engaged in this spiritual converse - the gain, when they are enlightened, is even greater than the advantage which they receive from their solitude. This is because they help one another by means of the light they receive from one another, but without a mediator. This becomes perfect stillness, if accidental things do not occur which might dislodge them from their goal, and they keep themselves from worldly words. (3/X:107)

Aelred (1110-1163) writes on Friendship

The sweetness of God that we taste in this life is given us, not so much for enjoyment as for a consolation and encouragement for our weakness. That is why it is such a great joy to have the consolation of someone's affection - someone to whom one is deeply united by the bonds of love; someone in whom our weary spirit may find rest, and to whom we may pour out our souls...someone whose conversation is as sweet as a song in the tedium of our

daily life. He must be someone whose soul will be to us a refuge to creep into when the world is altogether too much for us; someone to whom we can confide all our thoughts...His spirit will give us the comforting kiss that heals all the sickness of our preoccupied hearts. He will weep with us when we are troubled, and rejoice with us when we are happy, and he will always be there to consult when we are in doubt. And we will be so deeply bound to him in our hearts that even when he is far away, we shall find him together with us in spirit, together and alone.

If we love our friends for the consolation of their company, let our conversation be about good and serious things; let us reflect on the problems of life, and the guidance we get from the scriptures in these matters. We can share the burdens of our daily lives, and the hope of our future happiness that makes us happy even now as we look forward to it together. We can share our secret thoughts and strive together in our longing for the sight of Jesus' face. ..we must enjoy one anotherand our enjoyment must be in justice, so that we may exhort one another in a spirit of freedom

From Aelred of Rievaulx, *The Mirror of Charity*

(Tr Geoffrey Webb and Adrian Walker, Mowbrays 1962)

In Christian friendship there are three persons involved, Aelred says to his young friend Ivo: 'Here we are, you and I, and I hope a third, Christ, in our midst.'

Authentic Christian friendship must 'begin in Christ, continue in Christ and be perfected in Christ.' He calls a friend 'another self to whom you can speak on equal terms, to whom you can confess your failings, to whom you can make known your progress [or lack of it!] without blushing, one to whom you can entrust all the secrets of your heart.'(Book 2)

According to Aelred in an authentic spiritual friendship the primary foundation of this spiritual love is the love of God, and this should be the main reference point for all that take place within the friendship. In this knowledge we should choose one who is fit to be the companion of your soul, to whom you can entrust yourself as to another self. Once this basis of trust is established there is no going back; we should be prepared to work at the relationship through good days and bad, through joys and sorrows.

St Frances de Sales (1567–1622) writes in his *Introduction to the Devout Life*:

Travel with a good guide...Trust God, who will speak to you and grant graces through that person. God will put into his or her heart and on his or her lips

whatever is necessary for your happiness...Open your heart to him or her truthfully and sincerely, tell them everything good and bad, hide nothing and pretend nothing....let your relationship be strong, sacred, entirely spiritual and divine...Pray to find such a person and bless God when you find them; then remain constant and seek no further but go forward in simplicity, humility and confidence, for your journey will be attended with every success.

(Frances de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life* (Anthony Clarke Books, 1962), Part 1 Embracing the Devout Life, 4 The necessity of a guide.)

The need

In our Diocese, people often live at some distance from one other, within the same parish/chaplaincy. There can be both physical loneliness and also a sense of spiritual isolation. We wonder to ourselves – ‘am I the only one struggling spiritually with this?’ Or, ‘that was such a blessing, I wish I had some one to share it with!’

This training day aims to encourage the art of spiritual friendship. That might be the precursor to a fuller experience of spiritual direction...

Note: resources will be available for different prayer exercises that can be practiced between meetings

Spiritual friendship: What it IS

- Aspect of intentional discipleship
- Celebrates everyday spirituality and how that shapes our work, relationships, witness
- A companion on the spiritual journey
- A two-way spiritual relationship, with one other member of your church
- A regular discipline in which one shares with the friend aspects of their relationship with God, focussing on ways we pray and how that affects our daily living
- Reciprocal and mutual – 50/50 relationship in terms of time and attentiveness (see below, covenant)
- Intentionality and focus very important
- Attentive contemplative listening to another’s soul
- Helping them to discern God by asking sensitive questions
- Helping one another to clarify recognize, notice and name, and pick up clues about God’s presence

- Thus developing greater awareness of God and gently encouraging greater openness to God
- About asking questions, not giving answers
- Going beneath the superficial ‘how are you?’ to ‘how is your soul? How is your relationship with God right now? What is holding you back from... what is helping you most...?’
- Not problem-centred but growth-centred
- Non-directive
- Mutual accountability under God
- Absolutely confidential
- Acceptance non-judgemental mutually-compassionate
- Requires a measure of self-restraint or holding -back, from advice-giving (our default mode!)
- Requires a discipline of listening and keeping boundaries eg time-keeping, a clear beginning and ending to each session
- An everyday expression of spiritual direction (see below)
- Marked by equality, reciprocity, honesty and total trust
- Gentle, relaxed, not intense but very focussed.
- A source of re-assurance and, from time-to-time, of challenge

Spiritual Friendship: What it is NOT

- Not counselling
- Not confession!
- Not mentoring or coaching
- Not correcting or judging (“if I were you”)
- Not advice giving and not directive
- Not putting the world to rights (Brexit banned!)
- Not problem -solving
- Not commenting on church life / church politics or other people in church community or evaluating sermons!

Spiritual Friendship requires a Covenant or agreement

- agree time and place and duration (eg 30 mins each once a fortnight in Lent, other times, monthly?)
- Clarify goals, why are we doing this, what is the aim?
- Alternating roles -speaker & listener - a spiritual conversation but with emphasis on the listener clarifying, feeding back, summarizing
- How frequently shall we meet?

- Where shall we meet?
- For how long will we meet?
- Action point: What prayer practice shall we experiment with/ commit to this week/ this period ? *See document Pathways in Prayer for guidelines on suggested prayer exercises that can be used between meetings by each person.*

Sample questions

NB use open questions, inviting reflection not closed questions requiring a yes/no answer!

The aim is not gathering information. The aim is being 'in formation', encouraging a sense of progress sometimes (not always!) The aim is helping the other come to a greater clarity about their relationship with God and enabling them (not you) identify possible steps forward.... We develop an awareness of the difference between 'content' and 'process' – Content – the speaker shares experiences, what happened in prayer etc; Process – the listener asks: 'what is really going on? How is God acting in this person's life?'

- How has the last month been for you, spiritually speaking?
- What has good been for you this last week, in your relationship with God?
- Where did you feel closest to God?
- Where did you feel most distant?
- How do you recognize the presence of God in your life, what clues or indicators are you looking for?
- What are the signs that the Holy Spirit is working in you?
- In what ways are you growing as a Christian?
- In what ways do you want to grow, and take steps forward?
- How have you been praying? (referring to prayer practice)
- What is your experience of silence?
- What is your experience of listening to God?
- What is your heart's desire, in relation to God?

Issues to bear in mind

- Probably best in most circumstances to be between people of same gender

- Probably best to be in addition to husband/ wife relationship
- Don't necessarily choose/ invite members of your fan club, or choose a clone of yourself!
- Sometimes it helps to work with someone of a different perspective or church tradition
- But need to be on same spiritual wavelength
- Involvement/ detachment, need a sense of boundaries/ limits
- Don't want to encourage a dependency but a mutual support
- The relationship should be reviewed regularly eg every 3 months
- The relationship is confidential but if issues arise one can speak with priest etc in very general terms
- Awareness of the transition in someone from openness (desired) to vulnerability
- Knowing one's limits eg in prayer
- Ability to say – 'I don't know how to respond to that...'

Fruits

- As we become more articulate in speaking of matters of the spirit, of the inner life, of our relationship with God – this will equip us to be more confident witnesses (even evangelists) as we have become better able to put into words what is going on in the heart (*Learning the Language of the Soul*)
- Another transferable skill is the practice of contemplative listening – this will equip us for our daily ministry of being alongside people and supporting people
- new and deeper friendships develop in church community, less superficiality, deeper relationships and richer fellowship in the congregation
- this is for everyone, not just the 'holy few' – and will no doubt add to the health and well-being of the congregation
- Perhaps the experience might suggest an evolving vocation – to some form of ministry, perhaps to be trained as spiritual director? Greater awareness and alertness to the movements of the Holy Spirit in us, with the help of a trusted friend, will lead to greater clarity about our calling

Difference from spiritual direction

- We have called this 'first steps towards the ministry of spiritual direction'
- What is proposed in the term 'spiritual friendship' is an informal relationship – in a sense it should happen naturally within any healthy congregation –

people sharing together. It often happens of course, especially in house-groups and smaller gatherings

- The relationship with a spiritual director is more formalized and perhaps more rigorous. Spiritual directors are professionally trained and have gone through a process of discernment and training. They will be in some kind of supervision – that is, professional support. They will possess particular and fine-honed skills of listening and knowledge of traditions within Christian spirituality

Possible Structure for meetings

Opening prayer:

Loving Father we meet together to listen to one another and to You. Bring to the surface those things that we should share. Give us the grace to be patient and listening to one other. Help us to encourage one another and to discern your will for our lives. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

30 mins A shares with B

30 mins B shares with A

Closing prayer

Father we thank you for this time together. We lay before you what we have shared and we entrust one another to your care. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

*The Quaker Douglas Steere puts it: 'To listen another's soul into a condition of disclosure and discovery may be almost the greatest service that any human being ever performs for another.'*¹

Further information/ ideas for training from Canon Dr Andrew Mayes

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¹ D. Steere, *On Listening to Another* (San Francisco: Harper, 1955). See also A. Long, *Listening* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1990)