

**Do We Really Need Spiritual Directors Or Are They Just Our Latest Spiritual Fad?**  
by Richard T. Nolan [from *EPISCOPAL LIFE*, September, 2003]

Today, the movement in fashion is "spirituality" - the deepening of one's relationship with God. "‘Spirituality’ ... sounds significant," says "The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought," "with a touch of mystery, seeming to allow escape from the intellectual quest and wearisome wrestling with mental problems. We turn with relief from theology to spirituality, but may find ourselves enmeshed in a bewildering variety of techniques, or excitedly following a trail leading nowhere."

I was once asked to serve as a spiritual director. I wasn't sure what that meant, but I lapsed into a false notion of omni-competence and agreed. I discovered that the individual wanted a reliable friend to lean on; she wanted to pray together asking God to make most of her decisions; she wanted to feel a bit holier than others; she wanted an unmistakable divine seal of approval on her life; and, quite frankly, she needed a great deal of counseling beyond my skills. I was about to retire, so after six meetings we were able to part amicably, and I was relieved.

The issue came up again in the diocese where I live in retirement. I inquired about standards regarding spiritual direction. Are there clear goals and guidelines?, I asked. Is there some kind of certification of spiritual directors? I learned that there are no stated goals, guidelines or certifications. I suspect that this is representative of most dioceses. The words "spirituality," "spiritual direction," and "director" are as ambiguous as "therapy" and "advisor." Anyone can proclaim him/herself a therapist, advisor, or spiritual director. However, ordination, divinity degrees or life experiences do not automatically qualify anyone to be a spiritual mentor. At present, spiritual terrorism and quackery are unchecked inside and outside the church. Self-anointed spiritual directors are ubiquitous. McSpirituality is a growing industry.

The corrective to any ambiguity about Christian spirituality is the prologue to John's Gospel. This good news prevents a rootless, addictive spirituality easily hijacked by fashionable individualism, pop psychology or spiritual demagoguery. John's theological imagery provides the context for all Christian ministry: the wonder-filled declaration that the Creator's Word, the divine Purpose for humanity, is evident in a person who came among us. Jesus the Messiah is the personification of God's intentions for all human beings. If anyone wants to know who we are and why we're here, regard the Christ.

Occasionally we need supplementary strengthening of our faith. Throughout history people have truly benefited from particular mentors. Retreats and other pastoral ministries can be grace-filled and helpful. But these processes are not ends in themselves; they are not the key to vocation, and addictions to them must be avoided. We are called to come down from the transfiguring mountain and resume ordinary daily life together, deepening our relationship with God through worship, religious education and pastoral care. We must be careful not to be sidetracked by worthy or delusional activities.

We have chosen to accept God's invitation to be a community of faith that follows Jesus as Lord. He is our primary spiritual director; His way of living and praying is the spirituality with which our own varied pathways should be guided. He provides all essential spiritual matters that we require and gives us power to become children of God. What more could we possibly need?