



Listening for Spirit on the Margins

Tom Allen

Introduction

Let me make a suggestion. Get to know someone on the fringe.... They are the people who you think are as different from you as you can imagine.... Let this fringe person be your mentor for at least a year.

Be with your mentor in his or her pain. It is holy to just stand with a brother or a sister in pain. You will eventually tap into something inside yourself that totally resonates with that person's pain, feels compassion, feels familiarity, and finally feels love, because love is what it is all about. Then you can look at your own homelessness, your own inner prisons, your own retardation, your own battering in new and more compassionate ways. (Hagberg, pp. 293–294)

As I offered this opening meditation at a past Spiritual Directors International conference, many heads were nodding up and down in the room. I was delighted by the number of spiritual directors from around the world who are already “listening for spirit on the margins.” It is my hope and prayer that you, the reader, will consider this model of ministry for yourself and for the good of the community in which you live and work.

The ministry model of which I speak is the one that has been revealed to us at City House. We provide spiritual companionship, deepen faith life, and support self-sufficiency among persons on the margins of society—those who are or have been homeless, chemically dependent, or imprisoned.

I believe that all ministry must be mutual to be life giving. Yes, the little, the lost, and the least are our focus at City House. But, as an African American pastor said to me recently, “How are you insuring that you are moving beyond doing ministry for, and doing it with those you serve?” Experience tells me that persons on the margins can smell someone a mile away that is there to “help them.” They will either resent such a motivation as condescending, or they will use such a person to get what

they want. But real transformation happens in mutuality.

Four personal stories illustrate spiritual companionship on the margins:

* One of the first social service agencies with whom we partnered was a halfway house for men coming out of prison. We were invited to talk to the residents about what we had to offer. The program manager started off the meeting with a few administrative items. “Your guests will no longer be able to use the main floor bathroom because too many of you have been having sex with your guests in there.” I remember thinking, “I don’t remember this being covered in my spiritual direction training program.”

* One of our volunteer spiritual companions serving at a county jail called and asked if I could provide a ride home to one of the released inmates he had been companionship. I reluctantly said yes. As I pulled up in the early morning hours to find this man, all kinds of other released inmates were standing there waiting for a bus. When I found the guy I was looking for, he asked if I would also give a ride to some of his friends. I wasn’t prepared with the appropriate response and inappropriately said yes. As they all got into the back seat of my car, they each gave five dollars to the guy I had come to pick up, as payment for getting them a ride in my car.

* One of our volunteers who had been companionship a resident in a halfway house for women asked if he could go to court to support and pray for this woman during her trial. He ended up taking a day off of work to do so. This woman was convicted that day. The volunteer called to say that she wanted to get baptized before they took her to prison. We quickly arranged for her to be baptized at my church on Sunday. At the end of the baptism, the pastor said I needed to sign something before I left. It turned out to be this woman’s baptismal certificate. I was her baptismal sponsor and didn’t know it until it was all over. This woman ended up coming to our congregation for Sunday worship with my wife and me for the next nine months before she was sentenced. Today, she calls me once a week from prison as I continue to companionship her. In the two years I’ve known her, God has done marvelous things in her life. She has been and continues





to be drug-free, and she has broken free of a lifetime of prostitution. They call her Pastor Edith in prison.

* Recently, City House led an off-site retreat for some of the people we serve. The retreat center told us that it had been paid for by a janitor who lives in a low-income hotel and that he had never been to the retreat center. He just wanted to provide an opportunity for individuals who would never have the chance or the resources to do this on their own. Two months later, we received a set of books at City House from someone in Portland, Oregon, USA, whom we had never met. When we wrote a thank you letter to the individual who had sent them, we sheepishly acknowledged that we did not know who he was. He wrote back and told us that he was the person who had paid for the retreat we had led. He has become one of my heroes and a regular correspondence companion.

What we have learned is that spiritual direction on the margins happens way outside our comfort zones. Boundaries that would never get crossed in a classic spiritual direction relationship get crossed all the time in this kind of ministry. Spiritual formation is happening, but it isn't in the context of a spiritual direction room with a lighted candle and a formal appointment time, and it isn't one way—it's definitely mutual.

City House partners with four spirituality training programs in the Twin Cities (Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota, USA): Christos Center for Spiritual Formation, Sacred Ground, St. Catherine's College, and Center for Spiritual Guidance. These programs are a source of our volunteers. We offer our services through close partnerships with established social service organizations and their professional staffs. Social service agencies like us because we don't proselytize, and we distinguish between religion and spirituality. We tell their clients that if their religion is their spirituality, then they should bring it. If not, religion is not required. We provide one-on-ones, groups, and retreats. Rather than a place, we are a dedicated group of committed spiritual companions to this cause.

Currently, City House is serving approximately 1,900 visitors a year. We anticipate that number will rise to a rate of 2,300 by year end. We do this currently with 25 active volunteers at 20 different sites.

In this article, I will explain this ministry from the point of view of the three primary constituents who have

a stake in the success of City House—persons served (clients), volunteer spiritual directors, and social service agency partners.

Persons Served (Clients) Point of View

We call the persons with whom we walk “clients” because that is the name given to them by the (primarily) secular social service agencies with whom we partner.

At the sites where we serve, the persons that most often “show up” to talk to us are Christian, theologically conservative, African American, and concrete in their language and spirituality. Almost everyone we see is an addict or in recovery, most are or have been homeless, many have been in prison, two-thirds of them are men, one-third of them have a dual diagnosis of chemical dependency and mental illness. The sites where we serve include drop-in homeless shelters, crisis shelters, halfway houses, transition housing, program-supported apartment buildings, prisons, and even a work site.

It is safe to assume that individuals who do this work will be “conned” at some point. While there are many persons served who are deeply spiritual, many others will try to use spirituality and religion to work the system and get things.

What clients really want to know when they walk with you is whether they can trust you. They don't believe that they are trustworthy or that anyone else is for that matter. They will test you to see how far you will go. They also want to know if you will continue to come and see them if you know their crime. Ultimately, they really want to be loved and listened to, just like everyone else.

The biggest gap between our stereotypical white, middle-class, female volunteers and City House clients has not been race but class. Many of those we serve come from multiple generations of poverty. You can tell the difference between clients who are in situational poverty and those for whom poverty is the only way of life they have ever known. There are hidden rules of poverty, just like there are hidden rules of middle class. It is very challenging for both sides to understand and respect those rules.

Distinct issues of spirituality come up in client sessions, not dissimilar to issues that would arise in traditional spiritual direction sessions:



- * Listening to diverse spiritualities including a lot of twelve-step language
- * Getting in touch with powerlessness, brokenness, and deep need
- * Learning how to trust God
- * Healing past wounds and incidents
- * Forgiving
- * Making amends
- * Discovering ways of praying and meditating
- * Finding a community of support.

Voices of Clients

I've been a drug addict. I served time in a state prison. My kids had to go live with my mother. The City House volunteer helped heal my wounded spirit. She offered me comfort from a spiritual-based program in a situation that wasn't so nice. I had backslid on my connection to my faith while I was in prison. The City House volunteer taught me to have faith that God would pull me through this.

I'm now off of welfare, and I found a full-time job that I like. I've been drug-free now for almost two years. Most important, I have my daughters back living with me.



I grew up in the ghetto. My childhood was so poor that I was often starved and had just plain bread and water. I lived in a rat-infested house; I and one of my seven siblings had to sleep in the kitchen and cried at night when rats ran through the room. My parents were alcoholic. I started using drugs at age thirteen. My living environment was a place where we would fight to live and live to fight. I got kicked out of school in the eleventh grade for using and dealing drugs.

I couldn't hold a job and started a life of robbery to support my drug addiction. I went to prison twice. As soon as I got out, I went back on drugs because I wasn't ready to turn my life around.

Finally in my early forties, I hit bottom. God saved me. When I gave my life to God, I became a better person. I

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went to Alcoholics Anonymous and got a job. Now I have a soft heart and am willing to listen. My main task now is to love my brothers as God loves me.

My spirituality is critical to my recovery. I attend the City House spiritual direction group each week. The men share how their spirituality is keeping them on the right path. That group saves my life for that hour. Listening to each others' stories helps me with mine.

Soon I will finish my time in this program and find a better job. I have confidence in God, and with the support of others, I will continue on my path to recovery and become a contributing member of society for the first time. I lead AA groups and currently sponsor four other people. City House has been an important part of my recovery process.

Volunteer Spiritual Director's Point of View

Our volunteer spiritual directors run the gamut from evangelical to Quaker and everything in between. But, in general, they tend to be more contemplative, theologically liberal, and more abstract, esoteric, and nuanced in their language.



While spiritual directors are predisposed to meeting people where they are, not where we might want them to be, the differences between clients and spiritual companions in this ministry are significant. There is a much stronger sense of encountering God as “other” in these relationships, from both sides. Ultimately, we spiritual companions must acknowledge that we will never fully understand the clients with whom we walk. Their life experience is just too far out of our own frame of reference. And paradoxically, we discover that they are also a lot like us.

In traditional spiritual direction, there are different points of view about how much personal sharing the director ought to do with directees. In the context of the ministry with clients on the margins, it is strongly encouraged. Without sharing something of ourselves, it is very difficult to establish enough trust to make the relationship work. Part of what clients in this context learn one the secrets of middle-class life that can help them toward self-sufficiency. They can't learn middle-class rules if we choose not to share with them.

Again, as a group, spiritual directors are predisposed or trained to come without an agenda so that spirit can do its work. It is often said that spirit is the director. This maxim gets sorely tested when clients are so different than ourselves. The temptation, however subtle, in our white, middle-class world is to fix these people. One can see so much that needs to be addressed that it is challenging to allow God to do what God is going to do in these lives.

City House does several things to prepare volunteer spiritual directors for this ministry:

- * Matching spiritual directors with clients in a conscientious manner
- * Conducting volunteer orientation and ongoing education on addiction, criminal behavior, homelessness, culture of poverty, domestic abuse, mental illness, and so on

- * Mentoring volunteers one-on-one
- * Pairing new volunteers with experienced ones
- * Practicing peer supervision.

Voices of Volunteer Spiritual Companions

As a white, upper-middle-class, suburban woman, I have moved out of my comfort zone to a growing edge by serving at a woman's prison. The visits there plus the workshops offered to volunteers by City House have impacted me by broadening my understanding, deepening my compassion, and better equipping me to serve those who are incarcerated, the recovering addict, and those in poverty or who are homeless.

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Volunteering with City House has been a means of purposeful repentance for me. After years of working downtown and diverting my gaze as a means of protection from street people, what an amazing act of reconciliation for me to seek out, serve, and sit down with the homeless population.

Moving among this population keeps me much more closely tethered to God. The gritty everydayness of their lives seems, in many ways, so much more real-life than my more comfort-oriented middle-classness. Their rhythm—moving seamlessly, moment-by-moment from grief to joy, from death to life, from giving to receiving—has become something I aspire to in my own life. It calls me away from my addiction to comfort, to the control I feel in being always “the giver.”

Social Service Agency Partners Point of View

The leaders of social service agencies tend to be politically liberal and all over the map in their spirituality. Many of them are people of deep faith. In fact, the clients often know who they are and will seek them out when they are struggling spiritually, even though it may



be a secular agency. Social service agency staff persons must walk a fine line between church and state because of their government funding. They know that their clients need and want support for their spiritual lives, but they are not trained nor are they funded to meet these needs. They really appreciate the non-proselytizing approach of spiritual directors.

For agencies working with individuals who are in correctional aftercare, the staff must play a compliance role that does not allow them to very easily support client spirituality. In fact, clients will often use the appearance of religion to get things they want out of staff. So staff people in these situations are a bit cynical about spirituality and religion.

It is important in working with agencies to treat them as partners—to seek to be complementary to their existing services. The goal of the agency, “client self-sufficiency,” is helpful as a goal for spiritual companionship.

The agencies are comfortable if the focus of spirituality is inner strength and fulfillment rather than a particular religious faith. It is important to differentiate between spirituality and institutionalized religion. Customizing to meet the needs of clients and agencies is crucial to making the relationship work.

Voices from Social Service Agencies

Spirituality is essential for addiction recovery and to maintain a healthy lifestyle. City House supports that dimension at Alliance Apartments. Their program has pushed us to focus on client spirituality in ways that we did not before.

Just City House’s visibility, from their volunteers to fliers about their program, has challenged clients to take the spirituality of their recovery more seriously.

Having a positive spiritual life in addiction recovery is essential to make it work. City House has been beneficial because clients feel free to talk about things with City House volunteers that they won’t talk about with staff. They can deal with spirituality in a way that is

difficult for a secular social service agency to do because of public funding sources. We have quite a few mentally ill clients that we serve. Religion is often a part of their mental illness. We have to walk that line very carefully. As an outside organization, City House can walk the line between religion and spirituality more effectively.

The spiritual directors from City House have been a great complement to our programming. Along with spiritual understanding, the volunteers possess strong interpersonal skills and a deep interest in the well-being of others. I have been impressed with their ability to quickly form relationships. Their approach is flexible, compassionate, and non-threatening. They listen and then see where the conversation goes while providing companionship and support in the spiritual journey of those they meet.

Conclusion

I have tried to lay out enough of a framework of this ministry so that you can determine if this is something that might work for you and in your community. “The need is great, but the workers in the harvest are few.” I pray that some of you will feel drawn by God to look into this kind of ministry further. It is life-changing for all involved. ■

References

Hagberg, Janet O. *Real Power: Stages of Personal Power in Organizations*. 3rd ed. Salem, WI: Sheffield Publishing, 2003.