

Passionate Discipleship

Six Foundations

A Canadian Baptist Youth Initiative

Foundation #3

SPIRITUAL COMPANIONS



FOUNDATION #3

Passionate Disciples Need Spiritual Companions

My youth pastor once introduced me to another pastor by saying, “you’ll really appreciate this Ryan guy...he’s always asking questions and trying to understand more about faith in Christ.” For some reason, his comment has always stuck with me. I think it’s because I count this “seeking spirit” as a gift from God and a crucial piece of my discipleship journey. At the heart of my seeking spirit was a desire to be mentored, to have my journey of faith directed by someone who had gone longer and deeper than I.

There is much to be said about mentoring these days, but the point of this chapter is simply to say that if we are going to be passionate disciples, we need spiritual companionship. You can call it what you want, but the most important thing is that you have at least one person in your life who will walk with you in your faith journey, and walk closely enough that s/he can speak into your life with courage, truth and love.

About Spiritual Companions

To understand the concept of spiritual companionship, it may be helpful to differentiate between three different types of spiritual companions: spiritual friends, spiritual mentors and spiritual directors.

Spiritual Friend: This is usually a peer relationship that goes deeper than other relationships. It is an informal relationship but with the deliberate intention to foster spiritual accountability. You may find a spiritual friend at church, at work or at school. This is a friend with whom you can speak openly and honestly and you appreciate and welcome his/her insight and critique of your life and your faith journey.

Spiritual Mentor: This is often an individual who is older than you, someone further along in their faith journey. There may be some formality in this relationship because you may not see this person in the ordinary rhythm of your life. Like a spiritual friend, this is a person to whom you can speak openly and have an appreciation for his/her insight and input into your life.

Spiritual Director: This is the most formal arrangement for a spiritual companion. In some ways, the spiritual director is like a counsellor. You make an appointment with him/her and you may have to pay for this meeting or at least make a donation. Spiritual directors are most commonly found at your local Anglican or Catholic retreat centre or church.

How Do You Get Started?

The process of finding a spiritual companion cannot be rushed. Here are some things to keep in mind as you move forward.

- Prayerfully seek them out and be open to what God provides (and don’t be surprised if they aren’t who you expect or think they should be!).

- Don't go to your fans first.
- This time of watching and praying may take weeks, so hang in there!

Guidelines, Structure and Helpful Comments

Here are some helpful insights I have gathered over years of watching mentoring relationships.

You only need one. Relationships take time, so don't take on too many too quickly. If God provides, you may be able to sustain more than one spiritual companion. Realistically, your first spiritual companion will be a spiritual friend. As you grow and mature with this kind of companionship in your life then your spiritual friendships may transition into spiritual mentors or spiritual directors.

If you receive a spiritual companion, you may also be called to be one to someone else. Be open to God's leading on this.

God's got it covered! He's big enough to provide a spiritual companion for you and he's big enough to provide spiritual companions for everyone in your church or faith community. You don't need to be a spiritual companion for everyone, nor should several people be vying for the spiritual companionship of one "famous" person in your midst.

Try to avoid a programmed approach. Spiritual companionship is an organic and grassroots process. I would caution you against setting up a mentorship program in your church that feels like a contrived form of "Christian matchmaking."

Once you have decided on a potential spiritual companion, set a probationary period to see if it will work out. For instance, you may agree to meet three times with no strings attached. At the end of the third meeting either party can opt out without feeling guilty.

Work on some basic guidelines for this companionship so that both people are clear about the expectations for the relationship. Some of the essential components may be as follows:

- We will keep things confidential so we can be open and honest with each other.
- We will speak truth in love. We will not bash each other with truth, but at the same time we will not be too "nice" to speak courageously into each others' lives.

Eugene Peterson (1998) notes that spiritual companionship is not always neat and tidy, and offers the following insights:

I've had a number of men and women who have served me this way over the years – none carried the title of "spiritual director," although that is what they have been. Some had never heard of such a term. When I moved to Canada a few years ago and had to leave a long-term relationship of this sort, I looked around for someone whom I could be with in this way. I picked a man whom I knew to be a person of integrity and prayer, with seasoned Christian wisdom in his bones. I anticipated that he would disqualify himself. So I pre-composed my rebuttal: "All I want you to do is two things: show up and shut up. Can you do that? Meet with me every six weeks or so, and just be there – an honest, prayerful presence with no responsibility to be anything other than what you

have become in your obedient lifetime.” And it worked. If that is what you mean by “spiritual director,” okay. But I still prefer “friend.” You can see now from my comments that my gut feeling is that the most mature and reliable Christian guidance and understanding comes out of the most immediate and local settings. The ordinary way. We have to break this cultural habit of sending out for an expert every time we feel we need some assistance. Wisdom is not a matter of expertise (Eugene Peterson, 1998, pp. 68-69).

In the context of youth ministry, spiritual companionship creates space for intergenerational ministry. This is a very profound way of getting the generations to interact with each other on a deeper and meaningful level.

For youth workers, I'd suggest that you resist the pull to be a spiritual companion for your students! What I mean by this is that you should start by pulling together a small group of students who want to “go deeper,” and then help these students discern who their spiritual companion is...and that spiritual companion is not you. As you are doing this, it's important to start encouraging adults to pray about their roles in spiritual companionship.

See the **Recommended Resources** section at the end of this chapter for some guidelines and helpful information I have noted from online sources.

Conclusion

Seeking out or being a spiritual companion is not meant to be a burdensome duty for the journey of faith. Instead, it should be an experience that is joyful, challenging and life-giving. Remember that as you begin a relationship with a spiritual companion you are simply on a journey together and the destination is in God's hands.

We're looking for real life examples of this! Please send your stories and photos to:
communications@cbmin.org

Critical Thinking Questions:

1. Do you have a spiritual companion(s)? Think about how you developed these in your life, and then share that story with others.
2. What holds us back from finding spiritual companions?
3. Is it possible to have a church where everyone could say they have some form of spiritual companionship happening in their lives? Why or why not? Dream and pray that this could be a reality in your faith community.

Recommended Resources:

Peterson, E. & Peterson, J. (1999). *Mentoring and Spiritual Friendships*. IVP Books: Downers Grove.

Peterson, E. (1998). *The Wisdom of Each Other*. Zondervan: Grand Rapids.

The Institute for Christian Ministries. *Formation for Spiritual Companions*. Retrieved June 16, 2010, from www.healingministry.org/fsc/fsc_sampler.pdf.

College of Saint Benedict. *One to One Spiritual Direction*. Retrieved June 16, 2010, from <http://www.csbsju.edu/journey/everyone/SpiritualDirection.htm>.

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