St Antony's Priory
SPIRITUAL ACCOMPANIMENT

Working Online in Spiritual Accompaniment

Introduction

There is now a well-established culture of offering spiritual accompaniment, both in person and online. This guidance for working online aims to ensure a safe, respectful, and professional environment during online spiritual accompaniment interactions, supporting and protecting both parties. Draw on the experience you already have of offering face-to-face spiritual direction and use it as the foundation for how you work.

As always, our work with those we accompany is guided by the *Retreat Association Guidelines* for Spiritual Direction. Two sections are specifically relevant to this guidance:

Core skills and qualities of a spiritual director

- 4. Clarity: A person who can enable clarity in establishing agreement with the directee on the length and frequency of sessions and the process for evaluating and terminating the relationship, e.g. contracting, negotiating to establish clarity of relationship, process and expectation.

Good practice guidelines

- ensure there is clarity about the nature of boundaries and confidentiality in the relationship. At all times act in a way that respects the personal and spiritual integrity as well as the wellbeing of the directee.
- be informed on legal liabilities and ensure they have taken appropriate legal cover

1. Environment

- Make sure you have closed down any programmes or email and turned off any alerts.
- Experiment with where you sit in relation to your screen so that your directee can see more than just your face, so that there is a sense of more space between you. Maybe you need to elevate the screen and camera to avoid unusual angles and give a sense of looking directly at the directee.
  (see picture on right – the person on the right may feel like a relaxed distance away compared to the person on the left)



- Note where the camera is and consider how it looks for your directee if when you look at your screen, you appear not to be looking at them.

- Tilt the screen if you wear glasses to check for glare. Be careful to keep the light source in front of you if possible; don't sit with a window behind you, for example, as this will throw you into shade. What can people see behind me? What do I want them to see/not see? Change position to suit the space you are trying to create. Alternatively, most video call softwares have an option to blur your background.

- If you find it off-putting to see yourself once you've checked how you appear on screen, most communication software has a select 'hide self-view' option.
- Secure Connection: Ensure a stable and secure internet connection.
- Private Space: Conduct sessions in a private, quiet space to maintain confidentiality and minimise distractions. Have I asked those I live with not to interrupt me for this time? Do I need a 'do not disturb' sign?

- Professional Attire: Dress appropriately as you would for an in-person meeting.

2. Preparation

- Spiritual accompaniment is a sacred space. We often talk about 'holy ground'. Are there ways in which I can remind myself of this for this new situation? *e.*g. *Lighting a candle, placing a third chair within my peripheral vision, being able to see a special picture, icon, vase of flowers?*

- What is the most helpful way I can prepare to be *fully present* for this sacred time? *e.g. Taking some time to stand outside, look out of the window, pray, move my screen away from the desk, do some stretches, focus on my breathing…*

3. Communication Etiquette

- Let the directee know whether they will be in a virtual waiting room ahead of being invited into the 'room'. This is helpful for ensuring that while you are getting ready, they don't arrive early and stop you mid-set up.
- Punctuality: Be on time.
- Clear Communication: Ensure you are positioned to be able to speak directly into a microphone. Ensure the microphone is at the correct level for your position relative to your communication device.
- Explain what you will do if the technology fails on either end, for example, you will attempt to reconnect using the same technology (zoom, Teams etc..), and if this fails, you will phone them to discuss another option.
- If you are going to use the chat function, explain whether you will record/keep the information there long term or whether it will be deleted.
- Check in with the directee about their capacity to concentrate online; some people may find an hour too long, may need a break or may prefer a shorter session. You could also suggest that they have some symbol related to Spiritual Accompaniment that they can look at from time to time to help them stay with the conversation and give them a break from eye contact.

4. Privacy, Confidentiality and Security

- It's advisable to use a virtual meeting technology that has a password function or a unique link which only that person can use, so that you are not interrupted by other people.

- Confidentiality is considered to be one of the foundations of the Accompaniment relationship. When directees want to share or disclose personal information, they will feel more confident about doing this if they are reassured that their personal information will not be discussed or recorded or overheard.

- There are always limits to the security and confidentiality that can be offered in the digital world, and it is essential that these are understood by all parties and that risks are minimised, wherever possible.

- Security threats may arise through human behaviour or intervention, equipment failure, or inadequate understanding of the platform or software, and failure to take adequate steps to protect security and confidentiality.

Possible threats include:

- Physical intrusion at either end of the communication, for example, by being overheard or someone being present without the knowledge and consent of the person at the other end of the communication. Physical security needs to extend beyond the actual sessions by ensuring that the means of communication are adequately protected and not left open for others to view. Spiritual Directors are responsible for protecting their end of the communications.

- Electronic intrusion by third parties where there are insecure methods of communication, including emails, unprotected wi-fi, inadequate firewalls and virus protection (at both ends of the communication), the use of shared or unencrypted software or devices etc.

- Spiritual Directors need to understand how to assess a platform for suitability and how to manage settings and online environments to minimise security risks. As platforms are constantly updated, they should be regularly reassessed, and alternatives considered. Terms and conditions of service should be clearly understood.

5. Safeguarding

- Online safeguarding should be no different from in-person safeguarding.

- Have a conversation with the directee about what will be helpful to ensure a 'safe enough', and confidential space e.g. interruptions. Establishing boundaries is still very important. However, stay flexible.

- Be aware that some directees may feel impeded by the presence of others in the house and that rescheduling may need to happen if this has unexpectedly happened. If someone lowers their voice or looks concerned, consider how to neutrally ask what they'd like to do and offer to follow up by email to reschedule.

- If you are meeting online because someone is chronically ill or unable to leave their home or bed, this person could be considered a vulnerable adult from a safeguarding perspective (particularly with long-term disability, illness or mental state). This may change the relationship as you will have responsibilities to ensure a duty of care. You need to consider whether this spiritual direction relationship should continue or if you need a DBS check and/or additional training.

6. Technical Issues

- Troubleshooting: It is important to be sufficiently competent in the use of technology to be able to offer reliable and adequate accompaniment.

- Spiritual Directors should ensure that they understand not only how to operate the equipment and software safely and appropriately, but also that they are familiar with security, software settings, and problem-solving implications.

- It is important not only for the spiritual director to be proficient in the use of devices and software but also to be able to guide and advise directees in these matters, to facilitate safe and effective communication at both ends of the connection.

- Backup Plan: It is essential to have a backup communication method (e.g., phone call) in case of technical difficulties.