Spiritual Direction and Counseling: Differences, Overlap, and Guidelines if Pursued Simultaneously

**Spiritual Direction** is about listening for God’s “voice” and glimpsing God in all aspects of life. A spiritual director is a companion on your spiritual journey who helps you savor the sacred, embrace Mystery, connect head and heart, and remember who you are as a beloved child of God. Direction may include silence or intuitive reflection on scripture. Directors can support the development of spiritual practices and help with discernment. They are more like midwives than “directors”. Individual direction is often once a month for an hour. Group direction enables deep connection as participants hold sacred what each person shares.

**Counseling** often begins when distress has exceeded one’s capacity to cope. Concerns may include anxiety, depression, grief, lifestyle changes, skill-building for a better relationship with oneself or others, and reprocessing and integrating difficult or traumatic life experiences. Counseling is hard but good work; it can increase self-understanding and responsibility, resilience, freedom, relational harmony, life balance, peace and overall wellbeing. There are countless approaches to counseling and support groups can be helpful. A person may complete what they want to do in only a few sessions, or it can take much longer. Weekly sessions are often needed, at least in the beginning. As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it in her book, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, “We go to counselors when we want help getting out of caves. We go to directors when we are ready to be led further in.” (p. 129)

**An overlap** is that counseling and direction involve a relationship of deepening trust, honesty, and care focused on the needs of the directee or client. Both require curiosity, truth-seeking, non-judgment, patience and grace. A “good fit” results from agreement on the purpose and approach.

**Guidelines:** Counseling and direction can be mutually enhancing but are different and should not be sought from the same person. Counseling may need to precede direction; a director may encourage taking certain issues to a therapist. Both practitioners need permission to consult with each other as needed.