

IONA COLLABORATIVE AT SEMINARY OF THE SOUTHWEST



A Guide to Congregational Spiritual Direction

Welcome

Thank you for considering participation in the Iona Collaborative's Congregational Spiritual Direction Project at Seminary of the Southwest in Austin, Texas. This project pairs congregations with a trained Congregational Spiritual Director who accompanies them over time. Together, a congregation and the spiritual director will create space to listen deeply to one another, attend to what is happening in the life of a congregation, and discern where God may be leading. Your participation would also help us learn more about the practice of Congregational Spiritual Direction itself. We would establish a starting point with participating congregations and return to these same questions at the end of the project to better understand whether and in what ways Congregational Spiritual Direction makes a difference in the life of a congregation.

This guide explains what Congregational Spiritual Direction is, what participation in the project would involve, and how to discern whether this opportunity is a good fit for your congregation.

Why Congregational Spiritual Direction?

Over the past five years, the Iona Collaborative has accompanied more than fifty small congregations, most of them learning to thrive with part-time clergy, shared clergy, or increasing lay leadership. Through this work, we have learned that adapting to the changing realities of congregational life is not simply an organizational challenge. It has intellectual, emotional, organizational, and spiritual dimensions.

There are new things for congregations to learn about leading and organizing differently. There are practical changes that can help churches use their people and resources in new ways. And there are real feelings of grief, anxiety, uncertainty, and sometimes hope that accompany the loss of familiar ways of being church.

But we have also discovered that the deepest work is spiritual. Congregations are not simply being asked to manage decline or adjust to fewer resources. They are being invited to discern what God may be doing in the midst of change—and what new forms of faithful life God may be calling them toward.

Congregational Spiritual Direction grew out of that discovery. It is designed to help congregations slow down, listen deeply together, and discern where God is leading in seasons of change.

What Is Congregational Spiritual Direction?

Congregational Spiritual Direction is a way of accompanying a congregation as it listens for the movement of the Holy Spirit in its shared life. It creates space for people to slow down, pay attention to what is happening within and around them, and discern together where God may be leading.

Congregations naturally spend much of their time asking church questions:

- How do we recruit volunteers?
- How do we care for our building?
- Should we continue this ministry?
- How do we welcome new members?

These are important questions. But in seasons of change, congregations also need space to ask God questions:

- Where is God already at work among us?
- What gifts has God already given this congregation?
- What might we be invited to release?
- What is emerging that we need to pay attention to?
- Who is God calling us to become?

Congregational Spiritual Direction creates space for these deeper questions. It does not begin with a problem to solve or a predetermined outcome. It begins with listening—trusting that God is already present and at work in the life of the congregation, and helping the congregation notice and respond.

What Happens in a Congregational Spiritual Direction Session?

Each session begins with a spiritual practice that helps the congregation slow down, become present, and listen. From there, your spiritual director will guide you through a series of short exercises that invite everyone to participate.

The exercises will vary from session to session. They may include silence and prayer, individual reflection, conversation, storytelling, listening exercises, or discernment practices from the Iona Collaborative Toolkit. Together, they create space for the congregation to notice what is happening in its shared life and listen for where God may be leading.

There is nothing to prepare and no right answer to arrive at. The work is simply to show up, participate, listen to one another, and pay attention to what emerges.

What Congregational Spiritual Direction Is Not

Congregational Spiritual Direction is not a church growth program, a congregational development process, or coaching. Your spiritual director is not coming with a plan to fix your church, increase membership, or tell you how your congregation should organize or operate.

The spiritual director brings a different kind of expertise: creating space for deep listening and discernment. Their role is to help your congregation pay attention to its shared life, listen to one another, notice where God is already at work, and discern how God may be calling you forward.

There may be practical decisions that emerge from this process, but Congregational Spiritual Direction does not begin with the assumption that your congregation is a problem to be solved.

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