

COVID-19: Theology and Ecclesiology Task Force

Spiritual Companions

Parish-based reflection groups



Introduction

The pandemic has brought so much change to our lives.

Together our diocese has undertaken the work of understanding how our common life and ministry have adapted to the new realities necessitated by COVID-19. This work took the form of a widely distributed survey, focus groups and summaries of key learnings as we sense God's presence with us in this time and place and continue to live into our call to be followers of Jesus in faith, hope and love.

Now we invite you into a slower process in your local communities.

Spiritual Companions presents one way for members of our communities to process and share personal faith stories during this extended season brought about by the pandemic.

In small groups, individuals are given the space to describe what life has been like for them over the past few months, what present life is like, and what lies ahead for them. They can name their joys and their grief, the things that bring them peace and the things that keep them awake at night.

The goal simply is to create communal space for individuals to share their experiences and to wonder about God's activity in their lives. There will be graces gathered just by sitting together and opening our hearts to one another and to our loving, liberating, lifegiving God.

Essentially, **Spiritual Companions** takes up the important work of theological reflection during this unique season of challenge and transition.

Theological Reflection

What is theological reflection?¹

Theological Reflection is a process of exploration in which we consider the ways of God with God's creation. We engage this process by reflecting on our individual and communal experiences in the acknowledged presence of God. As a relational endeavor with God, theological reflection is best done in the context of prayer, asking questions that bring different ways of understanding God to bear on our experiences. Theological reflection begins with experience and seeks light from God, Christian wisdom, and human wisdom. It discerns how God acts within humanity, including the particulars of our cultural, social, economic, political, religious and other contexts.

What is the goal of theological reflection?

The ultimate goal is to hear God with a listening heart, engage God's on-going self-revelation, and come to a deeper understanding of who God is in relation to humanity. We then can discern how to best respond faithfully in our lives and in ministry.

Some examples of theological reflection questions can be found at the end of this document.

Getting Started with Spiritual Companions

A local lay leader or clergy person organizes interested members in groups of three. The groupings should be discerned prayerfully. The basic trust within the group will be important.

It would be good if the group could commit to meeting monthly over a six-month period. This will give time for trust to build and for deeper sharing and wisdom to emerge.

¹ Adopted and adapted from Colloquy Guidelines, Virginia Theological Seminary, 2018. Special thanks to the Rev. Jacques Hadler and the Rev. Dr. Allison St. Louis.

Before the first meeting, the lay leader or clergy person might wish to meet with the group in order to describe the guidelines for group sharing, the meeting format, and the process of theological reflection.

On a practical note, meeting sessions could happen via a digital platform (such as Zoom, Google Meet, or FaceTime), or in a member's backyard or home, if social distancing measures can be kept. Please use your best judgment, and follow the guidelines of our diocese, state, and the Center for Disease Control.

Group Sharing Covenant

This covenant will help to foster the emotional safety of the group. It can be hard to follow, but try your best. Review the covenant together before beginning each session.

Creating space for all to speak and being mindful of each person's time

Using "I" statements, speaking for oneself and out of one's own experiences

Respecting the voice and the experience of another

Saying "no" to the temptation to move into fix-it mode

Maintaining confidentiality

Trusting the Process

It may feel awkward to speak and listen in this way. You may find yourself wishing to jump in to affirm what is being said, to give a tissue when there are tears, to tell a story that relates to the speaker's story. Withhold such interruptions for these sessions, and give the speaker the gift of being heard into speech by your deep listening.

Meeting Format

Allow 60 minutes for each session. Remember to turn off all devices and other distractions so that you can be present fully during this time.

Each person will take a turn being each of three roles: speaker, listener, observer. The **speaker** is the one who shares her or his experience. The **listener** listens attentively without judgment, comment or other interruption. The **observer** watches the interaction, paying close attention to the speaker, noting observable behaviors.

Review the [group sharing covenant](#) prior to beginning. Note the examples of [theological reflection questions](#) located at the end of this document.

Begin

Gather in prayer. This could be as simple as taking three slow breaths together, bringing your awareness to the present moment, and knowing that you are always in the presence of the God who loves you.

Part 1 (20 minutes)

Determine who will fill each of the three roles: speaker, listener, observer.

Speaker: Share from your experience for up to ten minutes. Share whatever is on your heart, remembering to speak in the first person (tip: use I / me / my language).

Listener: During this time give your full attention to the speaker. After the sharing, pose one or two questions to the speaker (see the list in the next section for suggested theological reflection questions). The speaker may choose to answer the question in the moment, or to keep them for consideration later.

Observer: Listen as the speaker shares. After the speaker shares and the listener poses a question or two, you will make a couple of statements about observable behaviors the speaker demonstrated. You might note, for instance, that the speaker became tearful when she began talking about her father's death, or you might observe that the speaker crossed his arms when

speaking about his relationship with his brother. The point is simply to reflect to the speaker what you noticed without interpretation or judgement.

Allow a moment of silence before entering into the next phase.

Part 2 (20 minutes)

Switch roles. The speaker can become the listener, the listener can become the observer, and the observer can become the speaker.

Repeat the process as outlined above.

Part 3 (20 minutes)

Switch roles for a final time. Repeat the process as outlined above.

Conclude

End in prayer as you began. Give thanks to God for the gift of this time together.

Questions for Theological Reflection²

Below are some examples of theological reflection questions. Notice that these questions are open and honest questions. The one asking the question could not know the answer to the question; only the speaker could know how to respond.

Naming God's Activity

1. How are you sensing God's presence in your life during this time?
2. Where might God feel absent or silent?
3. How are you being shaped by faith – in the present and for the future?
4. Did you share anything that surprised you?
5. What might God be up to in the midst of what you have shared?
6. What feelings surfaced as you spoke?
7. What might God be cultivating in you?
8. How is God drawing you closer?
9. What is God teaching you?
10. What comes up in your prayer about this time in your life?
11. Where is God's dream for you at this time and in the future?
12. What is your image of God in what you shared?
13. How is Holy Wisdom helping your awareness of God's invitations? What invitations does the Spirit seem to be issuing to you at this time?
14. What is being made manifest in you?
 1. "fruits of the Spirit?"
 2. sense of crucifixion?
 3. sense of resurrection?

² Special thanks to Dr. Margaret Benefiel, the Rev. Jacques Hadler, Ms. Alyssa Pasternak Post, the Rev. Dr. Allison St. Louis, and Mrs. Elizabeth Ward for their work in developing these questions.

Naming Cultural Factors

1. What cultural factors seem to be present in this event?
2. What role, if any, does culture play?
3. How might cultural differences impact your response (i.e., your perspective, analysis, decision-making and action).
4. What cultural stereotypes, if any, is this event inviting you to shed?
5. Which of my core values emerged?
6. What or whose values differ?
7. What social issues are at work in this experience?
8. Are there issues related to the use of power in this situation?
9. Are there economic issues that are at play in this experience?
10. Are there racial issues that are at work in this situation?
11. Are there gender issues involved in this experience?
12. Are there generational issues at work in this situation?
13. What questions linger? Insights?
14. Were my actions or beliefs challenged or affirmed?

Naming Our Response

1. If you bear witness to the Dream of God, what are your options?
2. How do your actions/decisions relate to your understanding of God's activity?
3. Do you notice a growing trust in God as you reflect on your event?
4. What is the most loving thing to do?
5. What does love look like in practice? What are love's actions?
6. What helps you listen for the Spirit's invitations currently?
7. What changes in approach or action might God be inviting?
8. What is hindering your ability to discern the Spirit's movement?
9. How are you invited to join Christ's ongoing work at this time?
10. What signs of crucifixion do you see in yourself or your site as related to this event?
11. What signs of resurrection do you see in yourself or your site as related to this event?
12. How do you sense your true self through this event?

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13. How do you see the Spirit cultivating you as a spiritual leader?
 14. How is the Spirit inviting your awareness of the Living Christ in those you encounter in this event?
 15. How do you discern your responsibilities in this ministry situation?