To Marcus G. Smucker,
friend, colleague, mentor,
and spiritual guide

Though you crossed over to be with our Lord as this book was completed, it bears witness to your wisdom and is a gift to all who practice spiritual companioning.
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Acknowledgments

After the completion of this manuscript, Marcus Smucker, one of the primary authors, passed away. We (Angela and Rick) learned a great deal from Marcus over the years, and we cannot imagine this project without his contribution. We dedicate this book to him and are grateful that his final contribution to the field of spiritual companionship comes to expression in this book. It is a tribute to you, Marcus!

A word of special thanks is also due to the persons with whom we have worked at Baker. James Ernest entered into a conversation with us about this project several years ago and has offered guidance and many insights along the way, including thinking through the structure of the book. Arika Theule-Van Dam was our project editor. She was readily available and exceptionally helpful in the final stage of manuscript preparation. We also thank Robert Banning, who served effectively as our copy editor. We are grateful to all of you.
Introduction

Among the smiling faces of those passing through the church doors on Sunday mornings are many who long for deeper, more genuine relationships in their congregations. They hunger for relationships that nurture them and challenge them to grow spiritually and for connections that move past surface pleasantries into the real joys and heartaches of life. In a society that is increasingly fragmented, they are looking for a place to take off their masks and simply belong—to come home to other people and to God.

As most pastors will readily admit, germinating a culture of honest and open conversation about life and faith, a place to be at home with one another, is not an easy task. Some are choosing to address this need by reaching back into the traditions of the church, hunting for wisdom and resources about communal life that continue to have meaning for our contemporary context. One Baptist pastor we spoke with has embraced this path with fervor, calling himself a “scavenger” of various spiritual traditions. But he also recognizes that there are untapped riches within his own historical community. In this book, we explore the history, theology, and practices of spiritual companioning in the Protestant tradition. Like gold miners who travel deep into the earth hoping to spot promising veins in the rock that are worth their time and effort, we are convinced that precious veins within the Protestant tradition, sometimes hidden or overlooked, can help to address the contemporary longing for connection at the level of soul.

This shared conviction brought the three of us together. Our relationships to one another have grown over many years. We have come to trust each other quite deeply and have even companionsed one another at different points on our spiritual journeys. In the highly polarized context of American society today, we regard it as a wonderful sign of God’s grace that a Baptist,
Mennonite, and Presbyterian could work together with trust and mutual criticism to write a book that speaks for all three of us. This book is different than any one of us would have written by ourselves. It is a sign and witness to the mutual enrichment of the diverse gifts of the one Spirit within the body of Christ. Is this not what our one Lord, the head of the body, truly desires? Is not this sort of unity in mission desperately needed in our world today? With this in mind, we begin with one of our own stories of spiritual companionship.

Discovering Spiritual Companionship

In my early forties, I (Marcus) faced a significant crisis in my life. After serving as the pastor of an inner-city congregation for twelve years, I seemed to “hit a wall.” Even though things were going well in the congregation and in my personal life, I began to feel dry and empty emotionally and spiritually. I was still reading Scripture and praying, but my passion for ministry was gone, and preaching was becoming a colossal pain. My prayers seemed fruitless. I could not seem to connect with God anymore. I began to question whether I had done something to cause God to seem so distant.

After six months of struggle, the congregation gave me some extra time in the summer for personal renewal. I participated in several spiritual renewal settings. At the end of that time, in response to a friend’s suggestion, I went on a personal retreat alone for several days in a cabin in the mountains. This was my first experience of extended solitude. I spent the time resting and relaxing, hiking and praying, pondering Scripture, writing in my journal, staring out the window, and fasting. By the second day, I recognized that the Spirit was stirring anew within me. I soon noticed that as I became more aware of God, I was also led to deeper awareness of my own thoughts and feelings. At the end of three days I was in awe. I felt humbled and tired, yet refreshed and deeply reassured of God’s presence. For me, the encounter bridged the gap I felt with God and with my own self. I discovered that it was not God who was distant, but it was I who needed time and focus to keep opening up to God in new ways.

This experience changed some of my thoughts about who God is and how I relate to God. I began to reflect on my patterns of prayer. I came to realize that sometimes my interactions with God at a preconscious level were still being influenced by earlier feelings of isolation, a sense of emotional abandonment and emptiness rising out of my childhood and youth. I recognized that my prayers sometimes focused more on seeking than receiving, more on...
my needs than on God’s presence and provisions. It was becoming clear that spiritual practices including solitude, meditation, and journaling could help me on this journey.

My primary spiritual challenge was not so much to keep searching for a deeper relationship with God as to continue opening myself to God. I have since lived with the conviction that if I take time to keep opening to God, God is present. God truly desires to be in communion with me. The retreat also changed something about how I understood my role in ministry. I needed to face the realities of my work habits. As the pastor of a growing and thriving congregation in the inner city, I had become overextended for too long. I constantly faced many demands. It began to dawn on me that I was doing more than God was asking of me. I was working hard for God but not always with God. Although it has been a challenge for me to live into this way of being a minister, my awareness and desire to work with rather than for has always been before me since then.

Embracing spiritual practices helped me to reimagine my approach to ministry. I wanted to find a way to invite the congregation into renewal also. In the months following the retreat, I offered an open invitation for a small group of persons to commit to a spiritual practice for a period of nine months. During this time, each one would meditate on an assigned Scripture for twenty minutes several days a week, write in a journal, pray about the encounter, and meet weekly to share experiences and pray together. I had no idea what to expect from the invitation, but sixteen people responded, including key lay leaders in worship, Christian education, and mission.

After a week of using these simple exercises for meditation and prayer, I was awed by the spiritual desire and hunger stirred up within the group. At first I was anxious in the face of this spiritual hunger. I did not feel adequately prepared to shepherd them. But I soon relaxed as I was able to acknowledge that God’s Spirit alone brings renewal. Our task as a group of spiritual companions was simply to keep opening up to God and one another and to trust that God would nurture us.

Years later I still feel awe when I think of my experience with that group. These leaders had been very active in the congregation. Our worship often seemed to be touched by a visitation of the Spirit. We regularly studied Scripture, and our Christian education program was very strong. We had already been a congregation with a vital small group program and a significant mission in the inner city. And yet when we committed ourselves to a particular time for reflection, meditation, journaling, and prayer each week, something new began to happen. Our deeper hunger for God percolated to the surface, opening us to a rich movement of God in our lives.
During this time, I also began to lead quarterly weekend retreats for members of the congregation. They included similar practices of silence, meditation on Scripture, journaling, and sharing our experience of encounter with God. These retreats were completely voluntary, and they were always attended by fifteen to twenty persons.

The structure of the retreats was influenced by Bonhoeffer’s thoughts in *Life Together*, where he writes: “Let him who cannot be alone beware of community. He will only do harm to himself and to the community. But the reverse is also true: Let him who is not in community beware of being alone. If you scorn the fellowship of the brethren, you reject the call of Jesus Christ, and thus your solitude can only be harmful to you.”1 The pattern of solitude, meditation, journaling, prayer, sharing about encounters with God, confession, mutual support, and deep renewal in Christ was bringing those involved to a new *life together*. This became a significant resource in building up the congregation as the body of Christ.

These events occurred back in the 1970s. For many years, I pondered that experience as a pastor. I wondered how to understand the witness of Psalm 65:4: “Happy are those whom you choose and bring near to live in your courts. / We shall be satisfied with the goodness of your house, your holy temple.” How was it that a thriving congregation with vitality in community life, worship, and mission was not adequate for the spiritual needs of its members? What was missing from and so badly needed in the programs of the church? Why was I twelve years into my sixteen-year term as pastor before I recognized this spiritual hunger in myself and others?

This story pinpoints the tension pastors often face between the demands of shepherding a vital and viable church program and of discerning how to respond to the spiritual hungers of church and society. Underlying the yearnings of all our members, recognized or not, is the continual desire to know God better and to experience the presence of God in all of life. It is the human heart’s yearning for genuine relationship and deep communion—always seeking but never fully finding in this life. The ministry of spiritual companioning is an important element in the life of the congregation to help us learn how to keep opening up to God and to one another.

The Renewed Interest in Spirituality

During the 1970s and ’80s, a growing interest in spirituality began to emerge in the Western world. A plethora of books and articles were written, seminars

and workshops were offered, interest in Eastern religions began to grow, and the language of spirituality became an accepted part of therapy and self-help groups. On the surface, this curiosity about spirituality seemed like a boon to American religion and culture. As we look back, however, we recognize that it also has an ambiguous side. The search for spirituality tended to be subject to whatever meaning and experience seekers chose. It was often consumer oriented, focusing primarily on personal fulfillment.

Eugene Peterson described the growing interest in spirituality as early as 1993. He observed that “there is a groundswell of recognition spreading through our culture that all of life is at root spiritual; that everything we see is formed and sustained by what we cannot see.” Many had begun to realize that secularism marginalizes two essentials of human wholeness: the need for intimacy and transcendence. The revival of interest in spirituality emerged almost overnight in order to meet these two needs. But, Peterson noted, the result had a certain obscurity about it. “It should be no surprise that a people so badly trained in intimacy and transcendence might not do too well in their quest. Most anything at hand that gives a feeling of closeness . . . will do for intimacy. And most anything exotic that induces a sense of mystery will do for transcendence. . . . Contemporary spirituality desperately needs focus, precision, and roots: focus on Christ, precision in the scriptures, and roots in a healthy tradition.”

Peterson’s words continue to resonate with us more than two decades later. In a time of enormous social, cultural, and religious change, the challenge facing the church is to provide clear foundations for Christian spirituality and to become a vital expression of the living Christ in our midst. We need depth and vitality in our church life that is rooted in the core beliefs and practices of the church that have stood the test of time.

Toward Spiritual Practices in the Church

Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow offers a helpful historical perspective on the contemporary renewal of interest in spirituality in *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s*. He defines spirituality broadly as “all the beliefs and activities by which individuals attempt to relate their lives to God or to a divine being.” He points out that “spirituality is not just the creation of individuals; it is shaped by the larger social circumstances and by the beliefs and values present in the wider culture.”

3. Ibid., 28–29.
During this period, we have begun to see some Americans describe themselves as spiritual but not religious. This trend has accelerated with the rise of the “nones”: persons who claim no religious affiliation. They no longer seek the guidance of religious institutions to give shape to their spirituality. They pursue their own spiritual reality in recovery groups, bookstores, films, talk shows, classes on world religions, self-help groups, therapy, and other venues.

Wuthnow describes this as a general trend away from a traditional spirituality associated with inhabiting sacred places to a spirituality of seeking the sacred wherever it may be found. The religious scene now consists of dwellers and seekers who experience God and the world very differently. In a dwelling-oriented spirituality the central image is a spiritual house. This form of spirituality was dominant in America through the 1950s. A spirituality of dwelling emphasizes habitation. God occupies a sacred space where humans too can dwell—a sacred space for worship, traditional programs, and communal gatherings. Here the spiritual life is rooted in lifelong membership in a church where many people are cradle-to-grave members of a particular tradition.

In a seeking-oriented spirituality, the central image is the spiritual journey. This shift from sacred house to sacred journey began to emerge during the tumultuous years of the 1960s and has continued to the present. A spirituality of seeking emphasizes moments of mystery, awe, and transcendence that reinforce the conviction that the divine exists. Yet these moments are fleeting. Rather than knowing the territory, people keep searching for the divine in a diverse spiritual marketplace. Churches and religious institutions may still be viable options, but individuals feel free to switch churches frequently. They view their chosen church not so much as a home but as a supplier of spiritual goods and services. In the face of the enormous problems confronting the world today, many seekers view the church as having little purpose. Some even see organized religion as part of the problem. So they seek spiritual meaning elsewhere.

In our congregations, we have both dwellers and seekers worshiping and working side by side. But they are strikingly different in the ways they relate to God and in their vision of the church. This sometimes creates tensions and disappointments. But they need each other, for neither dwelling spirituality nor seeking spirituality is entirely satisfactory by itself. Dwelling spirituality encourages dependence on communities that are inherently undependable in a complex, changing world, while seeking spirituality is too fluid to provide individuals with the social support and spiritual depth they need. It does not encourage the stability and dedication required for spiritual growth and mature character.
Wuthnow argues that we need a practice-oriented spirituality as an alternative to dwelling or seeking alone. As he puts it, “Spiritual practices require individuals to engage reflectively in a conversation with their past, examining who they have been, how they have been shaped, and where they are headed.”

A practice-oriented spirituality roots people in socially shared activities of spiritual depth that link them to the wisdom of past centuries. Such practices are inevitably embedded in religious institutions. But they will have little attraction for individuals in our present context unless they are personally meaningful and create space for divine awe, mystery, and immediacy. Practice-oriented spirituality is best nurtured by congregations that provide people with ways of entering a relationship with the living God in the context of genuine fellowship and spiritual companioning. As we saw already, through Bonhoeffer’s writings, this involves living in solitude and community, integrating both the personal and the communal, and providing people with both roots and wings.

We believe the practices of spiritual companioning discussed in this book are an essential ingredient of congregations today. Helping church members gain glimpses of the immediacy of God in their lives serves both dwellers and seekers. In this book we are especially interested in promoting vital personal and congregational spiritual practices in the context of the Protestant tradition.

A number of excellent books have been written in recent decades on the nature and practice of spiritual guidance and direction. Many of these writings rely heavily on resources from the Roman Catholic tradition because it has maintained a practice of spiritual direction through the centuries. We do not write to position ourselves against this tradition in any way. As authors we are greatly indebted to Roman Catholic writers and teachers in our own learning and development. Nor are we writing a book that focuses solely on classical forms of spiritual direction between one director and a directee. Instead we explore spiritual companioning at various places in congregational life and in a variety of practices, including group spiritual direction, spiritual friendships, and many spiritually formative activities.

It is our intention to take what we have learned about spiritual companioning from various traditions and personal experiences and to focus this learning on congregations in the Protestant tradition. Along the way, we explore the purpose and process of listening deeply to one another and reflecting together on the movement of God in our lives. This, in turn, can lead to increased awareness of God in all of life and to the ongoing renewal of congregations.

5. Ibid., 16.
Chapter Sections and Summaries

The chapters that make up this book explore various facets of spiritual companionship by incorporating sections on cultural context, Scripture, the Protestant tradition, practicing spiritual companionship, congregational stories, and exercises for companionship. The importance of Scripture in the practice and theology of spiritual companionship has long been affirmed in the Protestant tradition by the theological tenet *sola scriptura*, which teaches that Scripture contains all that is necessary for salvation and holiness. While this tenet has been interpreted in different ways in the Protestant tradition, it points to the importance of the Bible as the authority of authorities in the Christian life. Accordingly, we include a section on Scripture in each chapter.

Each chapter also includes reflections on the Protestant tradition by exploring resources from the past that continue to have relevance for today. Sections on the contemporary context and the stories of congregations are also included in each chapter. They reflect the Protestant commitment to bear witness to the gospel in a manner that is culturally relevant. Protestants have a long-standing commitment to “translate” the gospel into the language and lifestyle of a particular time and place. From the beginning, for example, Protestants gave priority to translating the Bible into the vernacular language. The home of this ongoing process of translation and embodiment of the gospel is the congregation.

Protestants do not view the church in terms of the institutional continuity of church hierarchy but in terms of the faithfulness of congregations seeking to hear God’s Word and heed God’s call to mission in a particular time and place. It is here—in the congregation—that spiritual formation and companionship should take place. Accordingly, we explore the broader social context of the church today and the stories of particular congregations that provide insights and possibilities for spiritual companionship in the present.

Finally, we describe practices and exercises for spiritual companionship to provide concrete guidelines and examples. We invite readers to imagine how these might be used in their own particular congregational settings, a process that requires the “translation” and creative adaptation we are describing.

Each chapter addresses one particular aspect of spiritual companionship. Chapter 1 lays the groundwork for understanding companionship as a relationship of presence that encourages deeper awareness of God’s work in the soul of each person and community. We reflect on the significance of companionship in a culture of isolation and suggest approaches to connecting with others that have broad application for the church.
Chapter 2 introduces a vision of the church that is rooted in a culture of intentional spiritual companionship. We discuss the foundations of human sociality and consider the process of nurturing congregational spiritual companioning through key concerns, like developing a language for the spiritual life and supporting various companioning relationships.

Chapter 3 focuses on one-with-one spiritual direction, a special kind of formational relationship. We describe the historical tradition of spiritual direction and consider the skills and art of walking alongside another person in the spiritual life. We also discuss the personal preparation of the spiritual director, which is critical to the process.

Chapter 4 attends to spiritual companioning in small groups. In the Protestant tradition, small groups have historically provided support for the spiritual life and ministry of the laity and have played important roles in movements attempting to renew the church. While congregations have many types of small groups, we identify key elements of groups in which genuine spiritual companioning takes place.

Chapter 5 focuses on spiritual companioning in everyday life. Many contemporary churchgoers have a strong desire to know that God is present with them in their daily journeys and has a unique personal calling and purpose for them, a vocation. We offer a theological and practical framework for discerning God’s presence and activity in daily life through shared spiritual practices and accountability.

Chapter 6 deals with spiritual companioning over the course of life. It portrays the spiritual life as a journey and considers the forms of spiritual companioning a congregation might offer individuals as they travel this journey. It also emphasizes the importance of gathering the stories of others in spiritual companioning.

Chapter 7 addresses the necessity of companionship for spiritual leaders. Leaders who want to provide companionship for others must commit to seeking companions for themselves. The chapter considers the unique challenges and demands of life in spiritual leadership and discusses the process of developing relationships of accountability and vulnerability that nurture spiritual health and well-being over time.

The Language of Spirituality

In light of the wide variety of traditions of spirituality that are present in Christianity today, it may be helpful to clarify at the outset some of the terms we use in this book. In the following descriptions, we provide some simple,
working definitions. We fill out the meaning of each of these terms as the book unfolds.

- **Christian spirituality** is about living all of life in the presence and by the power of the Holy Spirit. It creates a foundation for seeking to be conformed to Christ, to love God and neighbor as self, and to live in communion with the Triune God in Christian community.

- **Spiritual companioning** is a way of accompanying others in intentional relationships of prayerful reflection and conversation that help them notice God’s presence and calling in their personal lives, local communities, and the world. It involves the provision of support and accountability in responding to God’s invitations. We use the term “companioning” in *verb form* because these kinds of relationships are much more than casual connections—they require an intentional, active commitment to a way of being with others and with God. People companion one another through one-with-one spiritual direction, small groups, peer spiritual friendships, family and congregational connections, and other forms of relationship.

- **Spiritual guidance** is the assistance a person or group offers others in a spiritual companioning relationship. While this sometimes includes counsel and direction in learning spiritual practices, it more typically involves helping persons notice the movement of God’s Spirit in their lives. It is more evocative than directive, a process of drawing out their own sense of God’s presence and guidance rather than telling them what they ought to do or think.

- **One-with-one spiritual direction** is an intentional relationship of spiritual companionship between a director and a directee in which the total focus is on the presence, activity, and invitations of God in the life of the directee.

- **Spiritual friendships** are relationships between peers who commit to providing spiritual companionship for one another.

- **Spiritual practices** are patterns of communal and individual action that open people’s lives to God’s forming and transforming presence through Word and Spirit.

**About the Authors**

Angela Reed was raised in a Mennonite congregation in a small rural community in Manitoba, Canada. She became very involved in the church as a...
child and was companioned in her spiritual life by members of her family and congregation. In her late teens, she began to sense a calling to some form of vocational ministry, though opportunities for women were limited in her context. While she attended college, her eyes were opened to new possibilities, and she was commissioned for pastoral ministry in her midtwenties. In the years that followed, she longed for a richer and broader spiritual life and began to understand more deeply her need for ongoing spiritual companionship. She decided to pursue training in spiritual direction, and one of her instructors was Marcus Smucker. A desire to continue studying led her to complete a PhD at Princeton Theological Seminary under the guidance of Rick Osmer. Her research focused on the significance of spiritual direction training for pastoral leaders and their congregations. In 2010, she accepted a call to join the faculty of George W. Truett Theological Seminary at Baylor University. Along the way, she embraced the Baptist tradition. She teaches spiritual formation and directs a formational program that includes providing spiritual direction to students and local ministers.

Rick Osmer was raised in a Presbyterian church and received spiritual companionship from his parents, church school teachers, and the youth group leaders in his congregation. Through his involvement in a parachurch organization as a young person, he was mentored in the practices of prayer, small group Bible study, and relational evangelism. As a student at Harvard Divinity School, he participated in a training program in which he received spiritual direction from a Jesuit who taught him how to pray the Scriptures imaginatively in the Ignatian tradition. Later, as a student at Yale Divinity School, he had the good fortune of studying with Henri Nouwen. As a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, Osmer has taught courses in small group Bible study and has participated in small groups with colleagues and students. For many years, he also received one-with-one spiritual direction from a Presbyterian pastor. More recently, he participated in the Kairos School of Spiritual Formation, a program led primarily by Mennonites and influenced by Ignatian approaches to spiritual direction. In this program, he met Marcus Smucker.

Marcus Smucker was raised in the Anabaptist tradition (Amish and Mennonite) and was deeply rooted in the connectedness of a communal spirituality. Through several years of involvement in service projects, including working with refugees in Europe, he sensed God’s calling toward a spirituality of service. He served as the pastor of an inner-city congregation for sixteen years and trained as a pastoral counselor. This led him to embrace a relational spirituality. During this time in the pastorate, he also began a journey into the contemplative tradition. Later, as a professor at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary, he taught pastoral studies, helped develop a program in
spiritual formation, and taught courses in spiritual formation, including training in spiritual direction. In retirement, he taught spiritual direction for Kairos School of Spiritual Formation and served as a spiritual director. He also taught spiritual formation courses for Eastern Mennonite Seminary, Lancaster campus, and was involved in the completion of this book’s manuscript prior to his death in 2014.

**Cases and Stories**

Throughout this book, we share many cases and stories. These are based on real persons and events with whom we are familiar. To preserve the anonymity of persons and congregations, we have changed the names of all parties and modified our descriptions slightly. We have attempted to maintain the central dynamics of the relationships and situations in order to base our reflections on actual cases and stories that are familiar to readers who participate in and lead congregations.
Spiritual Companioning as Presence

Susan was serving as a lay member of the pastoral care team at Living Word Community Church when she received a call from Rose. They had become acquainted through a Sunday morning Bible study in previous years, and Rose was aware that Susan provided spiritual direction to a few people in the congregation. Susan was surprised to hear that Rose was seeking her out for spiritual companionship since she had not seen Rose in some time. Even when Rose did attend church regularly, she seemed to keep to herself, coming and going with only the necessary pleasantries. Susan did not feel that she knew her very well. She had an inkling that it took a great deal of courage for Rose to reach out to her, and she felt privileged to walk with Rose, wherever their shared journey might lead.

Susan began the first meeting with prayer and silence, and then she waited. Her open acceptance and hospitality of spirit gave Rose a sense of safety, which allowed her to release pent-up thoughts and feelings. Rose began by telling her story. She had been raised in a Christian home and attended a theologically conservative congregation. Her mother, who struggled with ongoing depression, embraced the morally strict view of God held by the congregation and their larger Christian community. The religious culture Rose was steeped in communicated grace verbally, but in practice embraced the notion of God as a strict judge. Rose’s father was an alcoholic who sometimes terrorized the family. He wanted to change, but he could not overcome his addiction even

Angela H. Reed, Richard R. Osmer, and Marcus G. Smucker, Spiritual Companioning

(Unpublished manuscript—copyright protected Baker Publishing Group)
though he had been admitted to a state mental hospital on several occasions. He died when she was a child.

The sense of shame in the family was pervasive. Rose felt responsible and sought to be a peacemaker and caretaker, wanting to make everything right for her mother and siblings. Reflecting back, she acknowledged that she had felt emotionally numb from childhood into adulthood. As a teenager, Rose began to doubt God, but did not feel safe discussing her spiritual struggles within the church. In her early twenties, she married a student attending a fundamentalist Bible college. In that environment, she tried hard to be a good evangelical Christian. She thought that if she only believed what was right, God would deliver her from what seemed like a lifetime of suffering. This did not work out.

Rose’s desire to free herself and others from suffering extended beyond her own family. Early in life, she had grand visions of alleviating world pain. She wanted to make a difference by caring for needy persons, addressing issues of injustice, and seeking to protect the earth. She began a nursing career in her twenties because this was an acceptable caring vocation for a woman in her community. Rose did not find this satisfying. Unfortunately, her marriage also failed. By the time she reached her mid-thirties, she was divorced with three children. One child had serious health issues in her teens. Another had chronic mental health problems in his twenties and continued to be very dependent upon his mother.

Rose carried the shame of her childhood into her adult years and found it difficult to form genuine relationships. Now in her fifties, she felt isolated and very alone in life. She was depressed and disillusioned by her experiences of life and religion. The claims of the church and even her own belief in God had become oppressive, making demands but seeming to give little in return. Through the years, she had been involved with counselors and psychiatrists, but they did not help much with her sense of personal futility. By the time she called Susan, she attended worship services and other church events only sporadically. However, somewhere deep within she never fully gave up hope in faith and in God. She continued to pray the Jesus Prayer, which she learned in a Bible study group, and she reached out to Susan for spiritual companionship.

Understanding the Cultural Context

While Rose’s life circumstances may seem especially challenging, her sense of isolation and struggle while seeking to experience God is not uncommon.
This is true both inside and outside the church. We live in times of significant stress at work, at home, and in the larger community. In such times, our sense of personal isolation and loss of support increases, and we tend to hold these losses privately with a feeling of quiet desperation. At the same time, we long to be understood and valued by others—this is part of what it means to be human. We all want friends who will accept, enjoy, and love us in good times and in bad. Most people would like to be genuinely known and respected by others for who they truly are, not only in their goodness and competence, but also in moments of weakness, failure, and personal need.

This longing for companionship runs deep. We watch for persons we can trust and who express interest in the whole of our lives—our social, physical, spiritual, familial, and professional selves. We may find companionship through marriage, meaningful friendships, family and church connections, work and school relationships, and special interest groups. When these relationships are healthy, they involve reciprocity, mutual respect, and the normal give and take of sharing, caring, and mutual support.

Yet even in caring relationships, the pathway to a deeper level of companionship is often unclear, and for some it is laced with struggle or anxiety. In our society, it is common for people to have many casual relationships but no close friends with whom to explore the intricacies of their lives, particularly in times of stress and struggle. We may be comfortable sharing hobbies or casual lunches, but hesitate to trust others with our private thoughts, desires, fears, and hopes. This is especially true for men. Many of us do not know how to establish the kinds of deep friendships that allow for genuine companionship, particularly companionship that delves into the spiritual life. Frequently we turn to professional “helpers” for support and care in critical life moments. The astounding growth of the counseling industry during the past several decades confirms this fact.

**Diagnosing Social Isolation**

The problem of social isolation has become the focus of a significant number of sociological studies in recent years. Around the turn of the twenty-first century, research conducted by Robert Putnam found that our society is becoming increasingly disconnected from family, friends, and neighbors, a fact that is impoverishing our personal and communal lives. Putnam’s research team completed nearly five hundred thousand interviews over a quarter century.
families. According to Putnam, changes in work, family structure, suburban life, television, and digital technology, among other factors, contribute to this decline. The notion of friends and family gathering to chat on the front porch at the end of the day seems a thing of the past.

Other research suggests that over the last thirty years, fewer and fewer Americans are likely to have confidants with whom they discuss what really matters to them. In fact, from 1985 to 2004, the number of people who reported not having anyone with whom they discuss important matters has tripled. Those who do confide in others rely increasingly on spouses and parents, a very small social network compared to generations of the past. Sociologists are confirming what many of us have already noticed: larger support systems in our culture are disintegrating, leading to widening chasms of social separation.

This sense of disconnection is accentuated by our economic and cultural circumstances. Changing patterns among emerging adults are a good example of this. In an article for the New York Times, Jennifer Silva put it this way:

Young working-class men and women . . . are trying to figure out what it means to be an adult in a world of disappearing jobs, soaring education costs and shrinking social support networks. Today, only 20 percent of men and women between 18 and 29 are married. They live at home longer, spend more years in college, change jobs more frequently and start families later.

These are people bouncing from one temporary job to the next; dropping out of college because they can’t figure out financial aid forms or fulfill their major requirements; relying on credit cards for medical emergencies; and avoiding romantic commitments because they can take care of only themselves. Increasingly disconnected from institutions of work, family, and community, they grow up by learning that counting on others will only hurt them in the end. Adulthood is not simply being delayed but dramatically reimagined along lines of trust, dignity and connection and obligation to others.

Regardless of age, human beings are wired to depend upon committed relationships. As these relationships grow scarce, individuals experience a deep sense of unhappiness and dis-ease that can be debilitating.

This kind of social isolation also tends to impact the spiritual life. When individuals have fewer committed relationships, their awareness of God’s presence and commitment to them is often diminished as well. As they disconnect from others, they also tend to lose a sense of connection with God. Our experiences of committed, loving relationships with others help us to imagine

3. Silva, “Young and Isolated.”
that God might also be loving and committed toward us. Jesus himself used these kinds of comparisons when he talked about the sort of gifts a father gives to his child (Matt. 7:9–11). If we think back to Rose’s story, we might hazard a guess that a lack of supportive, committed relationships throughout her life contributed to her impression of God’s absence, something she hoped to begin addressing through spiritual companionship.

A Calling to Congregations

Without a doubt, what happens in the larger society directly affects the church. The reordering of fundamental social structures presents a tremendous challenge for congregations in our time. Leaders want to create genuine Christlike communion, but they often do so by focusing on programs rather than people. What we need most today are spiritual companions. If we are honest with ourselves, this is what all of us need and desire.

The church can be a significant arena in which to pursue and explore deeper relationships with others. Congregations are intended to be communities of genuine, even intimate relationships. In the context of such relationships, the gospel can take root more deeply and bring greater transformation, especially during troubling times. The ministry of spiritual companioning is particularly important for helping to provide a genuine spiritual presence and a growing awareness of God. A congregational companioning ministry can also be a means for training members in various kinds of relationships to care for one another. The skills of listening, praying, and responding may become so embedded in the lives of individuals and congregations that spiritual companioning becomes part of a community’s way of being.

Listening to Scripture

Central to our understanding of spiritual companioning is Scripture’s portrait of human beings designed for fellowship. At the heart of human life is a deep and abiding longing for spiritual communion, animating an underlying hunger for intimacy, love, and meaningful relationships.

Human beings created in God’s own image (Gen. 1:27) with God’s own “breath of life” (2:7) are made for communion with God, one another, and their own selves. This is evident already in Genesis 2 when God sees that it is not good for “man [Adam] to be alone.” So God creates a “helper” to be his partner (ezer; 2:18 NIV), a counterpart who is equal to and even mirrors and corresponds to Adam, and they have the ability to communicate with one another. This is a picture of intimate companioning, a partnership between...
the man and the woman in face-to-face relationship. In “the garden,” there is companionship and communion not only between two humans but also between the humans and God.

However, in Genesis 3 this intimate, harmonious relationship is shattered. With human failure comes shame (3:7), hiding from God (3:8), casting blame (3:12–13), and alienation from self, human relationship, and the Creator (3:17–19, 24). The description of toil amid thistles and thorns, and eating only by the “sweat of your face” (3:17–19), speaks of the hard work humans must do to survive and also symbolizes the spiritual and emotional struggles inherent to human existence. This is a graphic description of the human condition.

The discord commencing with Adam and Eve is further magnified in their sons when Cain kills his brother Abel, breaking the most fundamental bonds of the family (Gen. 4). God confronts Cain, and he attempts to hide from the truth. In just two generations, this is now the second example of the effort to hide in the face of costly mistakes. As human community continues to develop over time, we see new challenges arising. The builders of the first city attempt to create a tower that will reach all the way to heaven to make a name for themselves and to penetrate God’s dwelling place (Gen. 11). Again God is not pleased, and human beings are scattered across the earth, speaking many different languages. Human community is marked by misunderstanding and confusion. God continues to express concern for the social dimensions of sin when he gives the Ten Commandments, which are all, fundamentally, about maintaining healthy relationships with God and with others (Exod. 20).

Many biblical stories depict the brokenness of communities resulting from the fundamental breach of humanity’s relationship with God, but Scripture also tells the story of God’s faithfulness. The God described in the Bible does not give up on human beings but reaches out in love to restore them to right relatedness with himself and with others. We see this at the very beginning of the story Scripture tells. When Adam and Eve “hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden,” God called out, “Where are you?” (Gen. 3:8–9). This call was like the cry of a parent urging a lost child to come home. This cry of God reverberates throughout Scripture and history, calling all humankind to come home again—a call that continues to the end of time, when God’s “family” finally returns to the place where God dwells (Rev. 21:3–4).

The biblical story portrays God’s restless and relentless initiatives to connect with humans and assist them on the journey home. God calls into being a new community, Israel, which is elected to show the rest of the world how human beings are to engage with one another, interconnected through a covenant commitment with God. The prophets cry out again and again,
urging the people to remember their covenant with God and to be faithful. When Israel fails in its mission, God sends his Son, Jesus Christ, to restore a sinful humanity to right-relatedness to God and one another in a wondrous act of reconciliation. It is an invitation to receive forgiveness and cleansing through Jesus, a chance to be at home with God, to love God with all our heart and to love our neighbor as ourselves. In the human condition of alienation, blame, fear, and hiding, the call to come home is a call to reconciliation and renewal.

As Jesus was preparing his disciples for his departure, he promised them another “helper” (or “paraclete,” from the Greek word paraklétos) to be alongside them, within them, and among them (John 14:15–17), even as he had been. The word paraklétos is variously interpreted as meaning counselor, comforter, helper, advocate, or one who convicts. It also might be translated as convincer, encourager, and mediator, one who suffers with, consoles, challenges, and guides. Jesus chose this term for the Holy Spirit (John 14–16) in order to convey the manner in which the Spirit would continue to companion his followers and they, in turn, would companion one another.

The significance of this is clearly evident in the New Testament picture of church as a community of people who are vitally engaged with “one another” as they are gradually being transformed into the image of Christ (2 Cor. 3:18). Brothers and sisters in the Christian community are called to be in lively interaction with one another as co-laborers in God’s work of transformation both personally and communally. They are to help each one to be faithful to God as they “love one another,” “encourage one another,” “exhort one another,” “bear with one another,” “forgive one another,” and so on. These “one another” passages are scattered throughout the writings of the epistles, occurring nearly two dozen times.

It seems clear that New Testament Christians were to be spiritual companions to one another, providing whatever was needed (exhortation, encouragement, and mutual care) as they continued on the journey of homecoming. In this mutual companioning, they joined with the Holy Spirit to mediate the grace of God to one another and to the world around them.

This is an astounding picture: human beings driven by an abiding desire to be “at home” while on the other side of the divide a relentless God cries, “Come home!” In this drama, people often seek to satisfy their “hunger and thirst” in all the wrong places—in material abundance, a need to control people and circumstances, absolute security, and sensual desires. Human beings are like the prodigal son searching for something in a foreign land while his father watches and waits for his return. This picture may be true even for those who embrace the Christian faith.
The journey home is not simple. It is a process of growing self-awareness, release of ego-driven ways, and increasing freedom to love God and neighbor as self. The journey home is not only an individual journey but also a road taken with others as we join together in the work of the Holy Spirit for renewal and transformation.

**Mining the Protestant Tradition**

When we think back to Rose’s journey, one of the more striking elements is her desire to seek spiritual companionship even when she had experienced much pain and disappointment in relationships. With her doubts about God and her sense of being oppressed by the church, why would Rose seek out Susan as a spiritual companion? What would this kind of relationship have to offer someone who is no longer sure she even believes in God?

Susan is a member of a Protestant congregation and an active participant on its pastoral care team. In her response to Rose’s request, she provides a helpful introduction to two basic theological themes that are central to spiritual companioning in the Protestant tradition. First, Susan agrees to enter into a companioning relationship with Rose out of an awareness of the human dilemma: the deep longing and need for communion with God that offers healing, transformation, and hope in human relationships that are broken and distorted. Second, she responds to Rose’s cry for help as a person who shares in the ministry of bearing witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

**Responding to the Human Dilemma**

Spiritual companioning in the Protestant tradition takes very seriously the human dilemma created by the reality of sin. It affirms that God’s grace is greater than human sin, but it does not seek to minimize or trivialize the brokenness of relationships with God and with others. Rose’s story is filled with the sorrow and pain that come from this reality. While her story is uniquely her own, it reflects a condition that is universal.

In the previous section, we explored the Genesis 3 story of the fall of humanity. When Adam and Eve took life in their own hands and sought to be equal to God, they experienced a deep sense of shame, a sign of their broken relationship with God (Gen. 3:7). When God came to fellowship with them in the garden, they were afraid, so they ran and hid (3:8). In their fear and alienation from God, they began to blame their problems on each other and on the One who had created them (3:9–13).
Thus began the dance of human history: longing to be in God’s presence but also feeling afraid to be seen and known. Adam and Eve wanted to be with God, but they dreaded exposure. So they hid from God. This underlying sense of shame, this fear and hiding, defines the struggle of the human soul. In spite of being created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27)—created for fellowship with God and one another—human beings are caught up in a profound ambivalence: an inner desire for intimacy and closeness while also wanting to remain hidden and “safe.”

This story identifies the “push-pull” reaction we all have in our relationships. On the one hand, we cannot experience fullness of life without deep connections; we feel the pull of our longing for divine love and for relationships of genuine closeness and fulfillment with others. On the other hand, we fear the exposure and risks that come with closeness; we feel the push of shame and fear that drives us away from God, leading us to hide from our Creator and one another.

Spiritual companioning in the Protestant tradition gives attention to this human predicament, and it offers insight into Rose’s experience. She is estranged in many ways, yet she longs for meaning, for relationships that bring closeness and fulfillment, and for what is transcendent. Augustine’s famous statement is certainly true: You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you. Our yearning to experience divine love is a God-given desire that remains with us always.

Susan heard Rose’s underlying desire for a meaningful experience of transcendence in spite of her struggle and doubt. She realized that Rose’s struggles with God did not grow primarily from intellectual doubts but from profound disappointment in her experiences of God as God was communicated through her relationships and the events of life. This left Rose with a hunger for the divine, but also fear and resistance to embrace the divine—the push-pull dynamic noted earlier. As a companion, Susan came to recognize that Rose was dealing with profound and difficult issues, yet she was confident that God was already present in Rose’s life. Helping Rose attend to God’s presence and hear this call lay at the very heart of their relationship.

Reflecting the Gospel of Jesus Christ

Susan also responded to Rose out of her understanding of Christian spiritual companioning as a ministry of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This christological focus is central to the Protestant tradition. Companioning in this tradition is not a form of therapy or a way of helping people deal with their generic spiritual needs; it is at heart a ministry of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel
is the “good news” that God loves us while we are still weak and alienated (Rom. 5:6–8). As parents have compassion for their children, so the Lord has compassion for us. He remembers that we are made of dust (Ps. 103:13–14). Five biblical themes central to the Protestant tradition can inform Susan’s ministry of spiritual companionship with Rose.

**Jesus as Savior**

As a minister of the gospel, Susan recognizes that the divine connection we long for comes through Jesus Christ, who died for our sins and offers forgiveness, reconciliation, and new life. Christian spiritual companioning is rooted in the recognition that we ourselves cannot resolve the dilemma of lostness and alienation in the depths of our own being and in the human community. This is something God in Christ has done on our behalf and in our stead in a wondrous exchange: Christ entered into the sin and death of our condition that we may stand with him in a reconciled relationship with his Father.

Spiritual companioning in the Protestant tradition is based on the belief that Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world. It is in this truth, definitively, that we hear the call of God to come home. This call is not based on our own goodness or success. It comes to us as a gift based upon what God has done for us and in our place. Susan responded to Rose’s request for help in a Christlike way, which embodied the most basic pattern of the gospel. She did not offer Rose her companionship because she deserved it or was a promising directee or might become a productive church member. Susan chose to enter into Rose’s deeply troubled life as a witness to the way Christ entered our world of pain and sin.

**The Love of God**

Susan soon became aware that Rose had not experienced God’s unfailing love in her life, nor had she seemingly experienced much love from others. Her relationships were relatively utilitarian in nature—Rose believed that she would be valuable to others for what she could do for them. This raised questions about whether Rose had ever really experienced or understood the nature of unconditional love—the love of people close to her and the love of God.

Love is at the heart of all Christian experience of the companioning of Christ through the Holy Spirit. Scripture tells us that “love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love” (1 John 4:7–8). To truly know God is to experience God’s love. In the created order, the beginning of the experience of love is designed to come through family. We often learn to know God’s
love through caring interaction with others, and we learn to love God back by loving others. Through our participation in love we can grow in appreciation for God and become more responsive to God.

Jesus said that love for God and love for our neighbors as ourselves are the two greatest commandments (Matt. 22:37–39). His statement implies that all of us, including Christians, also need to love ourselves. Love of oneself is often missing, as it appeared to be in Rose’s life. Some find it difficult to believe that God cherishes them and to value themselves accordingly. It requires not only welcoming Jesus as a savior, but also embracing the ongoing work of the Spirit in our lives. This is a necessary step toward healing wounds as we embrace new ways of regarding ourselves and learn new patterns of living. Loving ourselves as God does is part of the journey back home to God. This is not a call to selfishness, egocentricity, or undue attachment to self. It is a call to care for our own life as God values and cares for it.

The love commandments became a practical guide for Susan in her work with Rose. They served as a window for observing and remaining aware of Rose’s whole experience of life. They reminded Susan to keep attending prayerfully to Rose’s life in its inward, outward, and upward dimensions. In this way, Susan, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, was able to join Rose on her personal journey of spiritual growth that embraces every aspect of life. Facilitating the experience of love for self, others, and the divine was crucial in the companioning ministry with Rose.

**Jesus as Mediator**

Christ alone is the one mediator who stands between God and human beings, for he alone is truly God and truly human. This truth embraces all aspects of his work as prophet, priest, and king. In this context, we focus especially on Christ’s priestly ministry. While Christ alone is our one true sacrifice and high priest (Heb. 2:14–18; 7:25), the people of God are called to participate in this priestly ministry (Rom. 15:16; 1 Pet. 2:9). In the Protestant tradition, priestly mediation is not just concerned with the role of priests or ministers; it is a part of the calling of every member of the Christian community. We are called to pray for, encourage, and bear the burdens of one another in Christ, mediating God’s forgiving love and bringing the special needs of each person to God in intercessory prayer.

Susan understood spiritual companioning to include the “mediation” ministry of Jesus (Heb. 2:18–19). The companion joins Jesus through the Holy Spirit to reach out to another on behalf of God and to talk with God on behalf of another. With this in mind, Susan was able to serve as an important presence that helped to build Rose’s connection to God.
Reconciliation through Christ

The ministry of mediation is closely related to the ministry of reconciliation. In the second letter to the Corinthians, we read that God has reconciled us to himself through Christ and given us a part to play in the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:17–20). Through a process of prayerful reflection and interaction, spiritual companions offer support for an individual’s journey of reconciliation with God, others, and their own selves. This even includes being reconciled to one’s enemies.

In spiritual companioning, guides become ambassadors for Christ as God reaches out to others through them. They offer a ministry presence for Christ’s sake, and their relationships with directees may become the primary relationships through which directees begin to experience reconciliation. For example, Susan recognized that Rose was angry, disappointed, and alienated in virtually every relationship in her life. She was burdened and weighed down by a lack of fruitful connection. Susan must discern how best to help Rose notice God’s movement in her life, gently nudging her toward new patterns of relationship grounded in an awareness that she is forgiven, accepted, and loved by God. Rose was invited to live into the reconciliation God offered her so that healing and hope would pour out and over into her relationships with others. It would be slow and painful work, and Susan could not rush Rose along. Susan had to seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit as she worked toward the reality of reconciliation in Rose’s life.

The Unique Presence of Jesus Christ in Human Relationships

Jesus is not a dead man of the past. He is the risen Lord, who lives and reigns at the right hand of his Father. Jesus told his disciples, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Matt. 18:20). This suggests that Jesus will be present whenever human beings desire that God be with them.

Jesus takes this one step further in John 14:23, saying, “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them, and make our home with them.” Here is the remarkable promise that as we live and walk with Jesus Christ, our desire to be “at home” with God will be fulfilled.

In these biblical passages, Jesus teaches about the sacredness of relationships in the Christian community. When we openly acknowledge Christ and invite him into a relationship, he sows a seed of divine presence, renewal, and constructive potential. In Christian spiritual companioning, the responsibility
of directing or determining that potential is not up to those providing companionship. They have the more modest and manageable task of discerning and observing the movement of the divine presence in the life of the other person. Often, both are aware of this presence.

This is a sacramental relationship in the sense that the relationship is imbued with divine presence and becomes a visible expression of something invisible. The spiritual companion does not create Christ’s presence but mediates it in the companioning relationship. Christ is at work and the companion simply joins him through the power of the Holy Spirit in that work. God always makes the first move. We participate by offering ourselves to be in a companioning relationship with another “in the service of God,” thus becoming a means for mediating God’s forgiving, redeeming, and renewing presence.

Susan’s understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ informed her response to Rose’s request that she be her spiritual companion. Susan brought these convictions into her companioning relationship with Rose, and the convictions informed their relationship throughout. Susan’s agenda was not primarily to teach or persuade but to walk alongside Rose: to mediate Christ’s presence and to observe and facilitate the “birthing” process of the Spirit. Susan chose to be a companion on this spiritual journey of healing and renewal with the conviction that the relationship would be imbued with the love and energy of God. She hoped her visible presence would become a sign of God’s presence and compassion for Rose. This would be true regardless of whether Rose ultimately acknowledged God’s interest and presence in her life. It was Susan’s prayer that as she touched Rose’s life on behalf of God, Rose would also be touched by Jesus Christ.

In Western Christianity today, the ministry of spiritual companioning is critical to the vitality of the church. In spite of the many activities of the church, it is entirely possible for Christians to go through life without having a setting, a place, and a people with whom to have conversations about their deeper personal struggles or experiences of God. Some people have extraordinary experiences of God that they do not share for fear of being regarded as strange or outside the norm. Some feel scared to admit their doubts and struggles because they fear that they will be viewed as lacking in faith. Yet it is often in conversation about the deepest cries of our hearts—be it struggle, fear, embarrassment, failure, or deeply moving spiritual experiences—that we encounter God most easily. To have a relationship with a trusted and trustworthy spiritual companion or companions, where the deeper matters of the heart and soul can be expressed, is a sacred gift. Having a faithful spiritual companion to accompany us on our journey can facilitate continuing spiritual renewal and depth in our walk with God.
While a theology of Protestant spiritual companioning is certainly Christ-centered, it is also trinitarian. Spiritual companioning ought to offer a tiny sampling of the kind of relationship shared by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Trinitarian theology suggests that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit live in a relationship of radical love in which each person of the Trinity is fully open to and mutually implicated in the others. In the three-ness of the Godhead, there is oneness, a communion that is full and complete in eternity.

This is a picture of God at the core of the divine being: in unbroken relationship, total love, and profound communion. We are given a glimpse of this through the Holy Spirit as we are joined to Christ and, through him, to the Father. In spiritual companioning we are called home to this God who is at work in all of our experiences, inviting us to notice, trust, respond, and be transformed over and over. The ministry of spiritual companioning serves this movement of the Triune God, who calls us out of our lostness and alienation back home to the community we were created for and the communion that will be fully complete when God is finally “all in all” (1 Cor. 15:28).

Practicing Spiritual Companioning

The vision of community through Christ can be lived out in companioning relationships in many different ways. Rose’s particular story and specific need for a healing relationship were unique, and so were the gifts that Susan brought to the encounter. The companioning relationship is dynamic, diverse, often complex, and tailored to the particular journey of individuals and the unique personhood of the companion. It cannot be adequately described in a few pages, but there are several common steps that help to create sacred space for life-giving spiritual companionship.

**Being Fully Present**

The process of spiritual companioning begins very simply by being ourselves and giving our full attention to another. The companion welcomes the other person into an open relationship of acceptance and caring, committing to attentive listening, respect, and confidentiality. This kind of soulful hospitality enabled Rose to let her guard down enough to risk sharing her story.

How a companion invites the other into his or her personal space, as one human being with another, has deep spiritual significance. We employ skills that are fundamental to human social interaction, skills that nearly all of us can develop. We intentionally commit to meeting, greeting, noticing, attending, and accepting as one human being with another on behalf of God. It
begins not by doing or saying anything especially profound, but by focusing on simply being with the other.

The companion engages the other, over a period of time, in a manner that says, “I am with you”; “I care”; and “I am interested in your life.” We communicate this nonverbally with facial expressions, eye contact, posture, general attentiveness, and responsiveness in conversation. This kind of presence engenders trust, which is an absolute necessity for open conversation.

As Susan and Rose are getting to know each other, Susan initiates a conversation about how they will treat one another and what to anticipate in the relationship. Because Rose has experienced significant relational wounds, she needs to understand what to expect from Susan, including the time, place, length of meetings, and the particular role each one will play in helping to make their interactions effective. In this case, a casual “let’s get together again soon” will not be sufficient. This conversation may also involve some discussion about how they will relate when they meet each other socially at church events or around town. A mutual understanding about the relationship is necessary to provide adequate structure for this ministry and assure Rose of continuity.

Being fully present in companioning brings a kind of immediacy to others, a welcome, safe moment to let their guard down and reveal a bit of who they truly are and what they feel and think about God, themselves, others, and the world. Many of us, like Rose, have become consummate actors, able to share casual pleasantries while hiding away our isolation, confusion, and curiosities about the spiritual life. Susan’s most important gift to Rose is her commitment to a simple, intentional presence.

Being a Prayerful Listener

A second element in companioning is listening in a prayerful way. Part of being human is having a spiritual nature and an ability to learn to hear from God. The companion attends not only to the other person’s story but also to God’s presence and interaction in the relationship. This helps the companion to keep in mind the big picture of God’s greater purpose as well as it can be discerned in what is expressed through ideas and feelings. Prayerful listening often creates a deep spiritual bond.

Through this kind of listening, the companion touches the depth of the other without being intrusive. Instead of becoming a “helper” to solve problems or analyze dilemmas, the companion, through the practice of prayerful listening, helps to make the interaction less active and more reflective. Prayerful listening engenders humility as both persons “bow” before God with a heightened awareness of being in the presence of God together. The process
invites us to slow down, pay attention to our inner selves, engage in reflective interaction, and become more open to noticing God in the present moment. As Susan listened alongside Rose, she was reinforcing the belief that God wanted to communicate with them, and she was teaching Rose to practice this way of listening for God on her own.

**Being a Respectful and Empathic Presence**

A third way of engaging in a companioning relationship is by listening with respect and empathy. Offering respect is a way of valuing one another as God values us. The companion befriends the other by listening with empathy, being attentive to the person while his or her “story” emerges and continues to unfold. Empathic listening also involves identifying with another’s experiences, feelings, and concerns without becoming personally attached to or attacked by them. In the companioning relationship, this includes inviting in-depth self-disclosure in whatever way the other person chooses. It communicates personal interest, creates a safe environment, and is an offer to be present no matter what joy or pain is expressed. We hope to be genuinely present emotionally. As we express empathy, we make it easier for others to tell their stories.

Through empathic listening, Susan accompanied Rose as she explored the difficult parts of her life journey and, ultimately, the depth of her own being. Susan joined Rose not primarily to solve problems but to be emotionally present as Rose continued to unearth the layers of her life. With Susan’s help, Rose could identify and name the movements of her inner life—fear, despair, depression, and hopefully pleasure as well—getting in touch with some of her deepest desires.

Empathic listening also gives us the courage to face whatever is present in our lives and helps us to name constructive ways to respond. This is true for experiences of suffering, moments of great joy, and the acceptance of what is routine or feels boring. In her empathy, Susan might also find that she begins to feel what Rose feels right alongside her—both the pain and the joy. It is important that she release those feelings to God, who can hold them when she cannot. Caring for another in this way reflects the compassion of God for each of us.

This kind of listening may happen in various contexts and formats, including formal sessions and informal encounters, through years of walking with another or in brief moments of shared conversation and prayer. Of course, relationships will normally grow more fruitful as trust is built over time. The process of significant personal sharing and listening always requires a...
basic commitment between companions, implicit or explicit, that the other person’s story is of interest, that what is shared will be held in confidence, and that no matter what is said, it will not change the value and appreciation the companions have for each other.

**Being Reflective Together**

Being reflective together is another significant element in spiritual companioning. Like priming a pump, the respectful listening of the companion often facilitates greater self-reflection by the other person. It provides opportunity for others to listen to their own words and ponder the significance and meaning of their experiences and concerns. It is an invitation to deeper awareness of the events of daily life. Some reflective questions that may be useful include the following:

- What do you hear yourself saying?
- What comes to your awareness as you are speaking?
- What are you experiencing right now?

The benefits of reflection increase when it becomes a mutual process. Such reflective interaction may include dialogue or discussion, but it is often a simple pondering over life, including encounters with family, at work, or in any other context. The reflection process addresses how God seems present or absent in these experiences of life.4 Pondering the questions of life together, with each one initiating and contributing, creates a relationship of mutual solidarity. The companion may ask questions, not necessarily for discussion or to seek information, but to join with the other in solidarity. The process strengthens the person’s confidence in his or her own observations and insights. Together they can delight in any “aha moments” that arise. This is not a relationship of dependence but of lively spiritual interdependence.

We can understand the practice of reflection in life more fully as we ponder the biblical notion of Sabbath. In the creation story, God worked six days and rested from his labors on the seventh day, which was set aside for refreshment (Gen. 2:2; Exod. 31:17). The word in the original language that is translated “refreshed” in Exodus 31:17 is used as both noun and verb, to mean breath,

4. The term “reflection” is used in pastoral-care literature in a variety of ways. Most writers agree that it is an active, conscious practice. Some suggest that it is a cognitive process for clarification of thought and intention. Others say that it is a process of pondering, somewhat similar to the biblical understanding of meditation, which is a conscious process but moves more toward being open and receptive than toward mastery and control.
desire, vitality, or soul. When God took a deep breath on the seventh day and considered what he had created, God was refreshed.

This was not a time for God’s physical renewal, but rather a time when activity gave way to reflection, mastery to receptivity, and doing to being. Thus, in the order of creation, God instituted a rhythm of work and rest, doing and being, mastery and receptivity that is essential for human well-being. God invites us to embrace this same rhythm so we can be revitalized through times of reflection, time to simply be in the presence of God, time to be with one another and the world around us, and time to continue opening up to that which transcends us.

The Sabbath provides an excellent word picture for understanding the purpose of the reflective process in spiritual companionship. Whether the one seeking companionship feels fragmented, distracted, or burdened, or is simply hungering and thirsting for God, the manner of the companion’s presence welcomes the other to experience this Sabbath rest. “Rest” in this case is not an escape or a reprieve from difficult things. It invites the divine presence to break into daily experience again and again, bringing new life. The companion facilitates this continued birthing of a new way of being in life.

One significant resource Susan brought to Rose’s journey was the ability to step back and glance over the larger picture of Rose’s life. She might raise various kinds of questions designed for deeper reflection on Rose’s unique story: How did she experience God in her earlier years? What prompted her to begin considering agnosticism? Had there been a moment recently when she was reminded of God in some way? What were some of her deepest desires or hopes in life?

Ideally Susan’s questions would help Rose get in touch with divine transcendence. Personal and spiritual growth often occurs at the frontier of human experience. All of our experiences, those that are typically identified with spirituality and those that are not, may become like clay in the hands of God to help mold and shape us. Pondering one’s life in a companionship relationship can help evoke deeper awareness of God’s active involvement in daily experience. It fosters the conviction that God is present in all of life (Rom. 8:28). Not only is God in all things with us, but all of life is ultimately fulfilled in union with God (John 15:1–11; 17:21–23; Acts 17:28). This is the vision the companion brings to the relationship.

_Speaking the Truth in Love_

Companionship is also about speaking challenging truths for the sake of love (Eph. 4:15). As trust and openness in the relationship evolve, companions may
offer observations, speak “candidly” about what they see in the life of another, or even gently confront issues that need to be addressed. This is always done in the context of a bond of trust between companions. It is never a process of persuasion. The words spoken must first of all be offered to God and then, with reliance on the Holy Spirit, shared with the other person.5

This can serve as both affirmation and challenge. When companions speak a difficult word out of love, they do so “with” rather than “to” another. Such a soulful, prophetic presence may sharpen our ability to imagine what God sees when he looks at our lives, so that we can make clear decisions and strengthen our personal commitments. No doubt Susan may notice issues of concern in Rose’s life that she can gently identify at some point. An issue may be anything from an unhealthy habitual pattern to an inaccurate belief about oneself.

Whatever the case, Susan will need to give careful thought and prayer to voicing a word of concern and not be quick to do so until there is a history of trust and commitment. In fact, she may not sense the need to name the issue at all but may simply choose to hold it prayerfully with the hope that Rose will recognize the need to change for herself. Either way, Rose will have to know that she is loved by Susan before she hears a word of challenge. In cases of abuse or other such extreme concerns, companions must be quick to act and identify what they see to the ones they care for and to others in authority within the larger community. There are times in which safety trumps confidentiality.

**Naming and Describing Experience**

As our conscious awareness of ourselves, others, God, and all creation grows, a companion will encourage us to put our encounters into words. Naming and describing our experiences can enhance our interactions with God and others, and enrich our understanding of God’s work in the soul. It can also increase our sense of collaboration with God in our own growth and in the choices we make in everyday life.

Finding words to describe experience helps us notice the intricacies of life. Naming our inner awareness of self and God further enables us to recognize what we hope for in relationship with others—with family members, friends, at church, and at work. As we develop this skill, we also become more cognizant

5. Some church traditions include a form of “binding and loosing,” holding members responsible for significant moral failures that they refuse to confess and change, even to the point of removing them from membership (Matt. 18:15–18). Spiritual companionship as we describe it functions somewhat differently. Companions do not impose or demand. In some cases, a companion may choose not to continue meeting if the relationship is not proving to be life-giving and fruitful.
of the experiences of others, particularly those we spend time with. Gaining clarity in place of ambiguity strengthens all of our relationships and creates opportunities for us to empathize with others.

At the core, companioning employs skills that are learned and passed on, helping us build committed, caring relationships in ever-widening circles that get beyond the surface and address isolation. Susan’s conversations with Rose will help Rose develop her own ability to listen for the presence and activity of God in the lives of her children and others she relates to. We have seen this many times in spiritual companioning relationships. The purpose may not be to teach, but the skills for becoming a spiritual companion to others are learned by example and practice.

**Encouraging Spiritual Practices**

At the appropriate time, a companion may coach the other person in the pursuit of spiritual practices that nurture the soul and help that person continue opening up to God. The companioning relationship will attend to the other’s maturing experience with Scripture and prayer. For example, it may be helpful for Rose to discuss her choice of the Jesus Prayer as a regular practice. Why is she drawn to it? What happens when she prays in this way? She may also be interested in talking about a Scripture passage that is especially meaningful or draws her to pray. It is often helpful to start by reflecting on practices that a companion already uses.

When we introduce new practices, it is important to discern the process carefully so that the new thing is actually life giving and does not become a burden. Idealistic plans for prayers at five in the morning or for lengthy fasts, when one lacks prior experience in these areas, are bound to fail and bring more guilt than grace. Like the newborn child who learns to sit before standing and to walk before running, we all learn by increments, and it is no different in the spiritual life. In chapter 5, “Spiritual Companioning in Everyday Life,” we will explore in detail specific practices for companions.

**Exploring the Stories of Congregations**

Susan’s relationship with Rose did not develop in a vacuum. The women are connected to a community of faith, a congregation, even if Rose’s attendance has become sporadic. Rose became aware of the opportunity to meet with Susan because of a Sunday morning class, and Susan received support for the companionship she offered through the pastoral care team and the congregation as a whole.
The congregation offers spiritual companionship in many other ways as well, sometimes in ways we would not expect. These relationships function a bit like the strands in a spider’s web. The spider cannot depend on one strand alone to create its home; many strands are necessary, woven back and forth, designing a remarkable web characterized by strength and support. All of us exist within a web of relationship, but for many us the webs are small and have fewer connections than in generations past. The congregation can enlarge and strengthen our webs of relationship through intentional forms of companionship. Throughout this book, we explore the possibilities for companionship in a number of congregational settings. For now, we will consider a few of the ways Living Word Community Church could care for Rose and others seeking spiritual nurture.

**Pastoral Care**

Perhaps one of the most obvious approaches to spiritual companionship with Rose is pastoral care. As Rose grows comfortable with Susan, she might welcome a visit from another representative of the congregation, such as the pastor or a member of the care team. Living Word has two pastors and a few deacons who are available to make visits. This team meets regularly to discuss particular needs in the congregation, and Susan participates in those meetings. If Rose gives permission, Susan might mention to others on the team that Rose, and possibly her dependent child, would benefit from a visit. This would be another meaningful connection in Rose’s web of relationship to address her sense of isolation and disconnection.

The caregiver can learn a bit of Rose’s story, ask clarifying questions, explore options for congregational engagement and other support, and offer a prayer if Rose is willing. Rose may even welcome an invitation to meet occasionally, just to see how things are going. This approach tends to focus more on problem solving than does Rose’s relationship with Susan, but that is probably helpful, especially if Rose has particular physical needs the congregation can provide for. The caregiver may also come to realize that Rose has a passion for helping others and can then assist her in identifying possible areas of involvement in the congregation’s life and mission. Rose’s healing journey may actually be strengthened by opportunities to pass on the gifts of care and companionship.

**Pastoral Counseling**

Rose may also be companioned through pastoral counseling, a particular form of pastoral care. One of Living Word’s pastors is a trained pastoral
counselor. He may be able to meet with Rose to explore feelings, thoughts, motivations, unconscious drives, and unresolved issues from her family of origin, such as the experience of losing her father and her sense of responsibility to care for her family. Though these events happened long ago, they may still be hindering her personal and spiritual freedom in life. This in-depth relationship could become a significant resource for transformation. Developing this relationship for a time and then possibly supporting her through referral to another counselor will show Rose that the congregation wants to commit to companioning her.

**Preaching, Teaching, and Worship**

We might not think of the worship service or Christian education class as a form of companionship, but for Rose they could become important ways to receive new insights about her relationship with God, others, and the world she lives in. Because her inner conflict has been severe and her circumstances harsh, she has pulled away from these contexts. As the other intentional relationships develop, she will probably be more likely to return to regular church services and activities. Preaching and teaching that attends to honest experiences of people and their struggles in relationship with God will be critical for helping Rose know she belongs. If sermons, prayers, and other elements of worship acknowledge loss and pain, speak about family systems in broad ways (e.g., allowing for single divorcees), and make space for questions about God, Rose will recognize that her story fits in the community.

**Support Groups**

A small support group that meets regularly for sharing and prayer may be one of the most important forms of companionship for Rose. Over the last few decades, congregations have recognized needs for deep healing and the value of gathering people together to support one another in the hurts of life. Rose will benefit from various kinds of groups, perhaps a grief group for addressing the losses of childhood or a group designed for families facing mental health issues. The extent to which the group will be an effective spiritual resource for persons in a deep struggle or a “dry” place will depend upon the nature and level of the group’s interactions, their use of Scripture and prayer, and their depth of personal relationship with God. Some groups have the longevity, commitment, and skill to go beyond mutual support to engage in the deeper work of soul making—many do not.

In each of these ministry tasks, relationships are nuanced and encouraged in particular ways to support specific elements of the congregation’s purpose.
At the same time, no ministry task stands alone. All tasks are interconnected within the larger activity of the church, and they ought to complement and strengthen one another.

Exercising Our Companionship: Practicing Presence

The following exercises provide opportunities for practicing the interactions we have just considered. They represent only some of the relational exchanges that can help facilitate spiritual growth. There are many other ways to engage a person in a companioning relationship. We always keep in mind that we serve as vessels for God: we accompany others on the spiritual journey, and we try to focus not on our own wishes but on what God is already doing and wants to do in the lives of others.

A. Being Fully Present
1. Agree with a friend to have her tell you a story about herself.
2. Be fully present by doing the following:
   - Arrange chairs a comfortable distance from one another.
   - Sit in a relaxed manner, maintaining good eye contact.
   - Use nonverbal and verbal communication to respond to the person and her story (e.g., eye contact, facial expressions, nodding to indicate listening).
3. At the end, reflect together on the experience.
   - On a scale of 1 to 10, how present to your friend did you feel?
   - What was it like for you to be present with the other?
   - What was it like for your friend to experience your presence?

B. Expressing Empathy
1. Agree with a friend to have him share something about his spiritual life.
2. Listen carefully and, as appropriate, paraphrase what you are hearing.
3. Let yourself be aware of what the other person is expressing (feelings, concerns, etc.).
4. Toward the end of the time together, tell him your sense of what he was expressing; invite your friend’s correction as needed.
5. Invite your friend to reflect with you about what he experienced in the session, particularly the process of having you listen.
C. Listening While Praying
1. Agree with a friend that she will share something about her spiritual life.
2. Sit with your hands on your lap, palms up, in a posture of prayer while the other person is sharing. Keep verbal responses to a minimum. As much as possible be aware of God (or Jesus specifically) in the room with you.
3. At the end, reflect together on the experience and discuss the following:
   - What did your friend experience as you were listening prayerfully?
   - What was it like for you to practice “prayerful listening” with your friend?

D. Using Reflective Questions
1. Agree with a friend that he will share something about his spiritual life.
2. Listen carefully and, as appropriate, paraphrase what you are hearing.
3. As the story unfolds, ask a few reflective questions, including the following and one or two of your own:
   - What was that like for you?
   - What was your experience (of that event or moment)?
   - What were you feeling or thinking as this was happening?
   - What are you experiencing now?
   - How does this (or has this) affected your life?
   - What do you desire from God in this situation?

E. Describing the Experience of God
1. Agree with a friend to have her share about an encounter with God.
2. Listen carefully and, as appropriate, paraphrase what you are hearing.
3. Ask a few of the following questions:
   - What did God seem like in that encounter?
   - How do you suppose God feels about that?
   - What do you suppose God is doing (or wanting to do) in your situation?
   - What might be God’s desire for you (or someone else) in this situation?
For Further Reading


———. *Caring Enough to Hear and Be Heard*. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1982. An introductory text that teaches readers how to listen and be heard, and to reach out across a void to really learn to know the other person.

Brenneman, Terri J. *Practicing Presence*. Harrisonburg, VA: MennoMedia, 2012. Twelve study sessions that highlight how to be present with one another and with God, examining biblical texts that illustrate the importance of companioning one another.


