

What is spiritual accompaniment?
Notes for a talk to Quaker Universalist Group 15.4.26
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- *Listening is at the heart of what we do; we listen inwardly, and outwardly*
- *We aim to be open to new light wherever it comes from, especially when things get difficult for us or for our communities.*
- *Our discipline is not about telling people what they should or should not believe or do (except occasionally when behaviour disrupts or damages our worship or witness or may harm people)*
- *Being listened to can help us hear what we ourselves have to say, and what we may be hearing from our inner guide.*

The “we” in these statements could refer to Quakers. They are also true for those who offer a ministry of spiritual accompaniment, or spiritual direction, in an ecumenical context.

I invite you to think for a moment about a time when you were surprised at something that you said to someone.... or what the fact that you had said something out loud changed something in you - how you saw or felt about something, or what action you might need to take.

I know that has been the case for me. Talking to someone about something that touches me spiritually always feels like an adventure. Slightly dangerous, but also a leading edge that can lead to new discoveries, revelations, growth, even transformations.

If the conversation takes place in a spirit of worship, it's all the more powerful.

Accompanying one another on our spiritual journeys is a central part of our Quaker tradition. Following the examples of Jesus's disciples as they travelled to spread the word about him, they travelled in pairs. Partly that was helpful for practical reasons of safety and mutual assistance, but I am sure it was also valuable to have someone to talk to - not just for company but to listen deeply to and to help discern leadings of the Holy Spirit.

These days, much of such listening among Quakers takes place informally, through our friendships. Ministry in our Meetings for Worship and in afterwords also involves deep listening and being heard, and we also have meetings for clearness, threshing etc.

The only time most of us are really invited to share our spiritual journeys. though, is when we are visited as part of a membership application process, or perhaps if we are invited to speak to a group about an aspect of it. These occasions can be important. My experience has often been that they have made me dig more deeply and make new discoveries - or sometimes be reminded of important things I had forgotten. Paying attention to such leadings and trying to express them gives them strength and power. This is true of other forms of expression too, such as in writing or images, but actually sharing something of them with another person seems to add weight and commitment.

However we don't always have a spiritual friend to hand. Also we sometimes need to talk with someone outside our usual circle. That's where spiritual accompaniment can come in.

Some people would say it's the role of elders or sometimes pastoral Friends to be listeners, and this is true, However, many of them don't have time to do this regularly and it may not be something they are very good at either, We all have different gifts.

Spiritual accompaniment, or spiritual direction, is a process whereby someone with suitable training will listen to another, in a spirit of worship, without judgment, but simply holding space for

our inner guide/the Holy Spirit/God to be heard. It's an old practice in some Christian traditions which has been revived in recent decades. Ecumenical groups around the country offer training supervision and support to spiritual directors, and a way to find a director.

I've been in accompaniment for around 20 years, starting a couple of years after I completed Woodbrooke's Equipping for Ministry. Having a personal tutor then helped me keep spiritual practice and I missed that. I've had three accompaniers over that time, for short or long periods. These days I see mine about three times a year, but it has been more frequent at other times.

Each time I come away feeling more grounded, clearer, and often surprised at what came up or how I have seen things with new eyes. It has helped me support my parents in their last few years, strengthened my spiritual life and my witness and caused me to live more adventurously (for me) and to speak out in ways I would not have done otherwise.

I trained as a Spiritual Director through Southwark Anglican Diocese's ecumenical training course and I've met a number of other Friends who have also trained. Some of us are keen to make this practice better known among Friends and to support one another in this ministry. A few of us met on a Woodbrooke session on Spiritual Accompaniment for climate witness a couple of years ago and started a Quaker Spiritual Accompaniment network. The *Friends Quarterly* had a special issue on this theme, February 2025.

Since then we've held a number of zoom events about particular aspects of spiritual accompaniment including:

- Quaker Quest style with 3 friends sharing of their experience of Spiritual Accompaniment
- Accompaniment for Quaker witness.
- Introduction to Experiment with Light and Ignatian exercises, very different kinds of spiritual exercises which can be used in Spiritual Accompaniment;
- Spiritual accompaniment for Quaker witness

We're also exploring whether and how we can make it easier for interested Friends to find a suitable accompanier, and the practicalities of offering a referral system. To do this we would also need some organisational infrastructure. Our thinking is developing and we're wondering about becoming a Quaker Recognised Body. We want to keep this as simple as possible, but those engaging in accompaniment aren't necessarily in a position to help with this organising. Anyone who would like to support this initiative and is able to offer a small amount of practical skills would be most welcome to get in touch!

Some people have asked why a Quaker Spiritual Accompaniment network is needed, when most of us are happy working ecumenically. We have found some Friends who would like accompaniment but don't feel comfortable asking this of a Christian organisation when they don't share belief in the Nicene Creed or other establishment Christian beliefs. There are also Friends trained as directors who don't feel comfortable offering this service to people who are assuming a Christian director. For me the ecumenical context has been enriching, though sometimes hard work, but I did have an Anglican upbringing and I've also done spiritual work with various interfaith (including no-faith) groups.

Spiritual accompaniment is a way to get to know ourselves and others in 'that which is eternal'. It fosters our relationship with the divine, the parts of us we use in worship. For those who are yearning for greater spiritual depth in their lives, this may be a route to explore.

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Postscript. Do visit <https://centralenglandquakers.org.uk/2026/01/15/quaker-spiritual-accompaniment-network/> (written in January 2026) for more information or send an email to qspiritacc@gmail.com. It is hoped that there will be an in-person gathering in the autumn of 2026.