

WHEN THE
ministry
IS *quiet*

SUPERVISION IN SEASONS
WITHOUT SPIRITUAL
DIRECTEES

ABSTRACT

Seasons without spiritual directees are a natural, often overlooked rhythm in the life of a spiritual director. Rather than signaling a lapse in vocation, these pauses invite deeper discernment, ethical attentiveness, and renewed formation. Drawing on contemplative approaches to supervision, this article explores how individual and peer supervision support directors during these quieter periods by attending to interior movements, vocational questions, and the subtle reshaping of our calling. It examines the ethical responsibilities that remain active, even without directees, and highlights the essential role of communities, formation programs, and professional networks in offering clarity, hospitality, and accountability. When communities respond with steadiness rather than discomfort, they affirm spiritual direction as a lifelong vocation rooted in communal discernment. This integrative perspective reframes seasons of pause as fertile ground for growth, readiness, and the ongoing unfolding of the ministry.

NOT ALONE IN THE QUIET: SUPERVISION IN SEASONS OF PAUSE

Mateo had been offering spiritual direction for many years when he noticed a subtle yet persistent shift within himself. Old grief was resurfacing, his energy was thinning, and his capacity to remain fully present with his spiritual directees felt compromised. After prayerful discernment, he recognized the need to pause his ministry and attend to his own inner healing. He communicated this decision to his directees with transparency and care. Their responses were gracious and supportive. Yet one question remained unresolved for him: Should I continue participating in the spiritual direction peer supervision group during this pause?

As Mateo sat with this question, it became clear that the answer was not simply personal. It touched something larger—how spiritual directors understand the nature and purpose of supervision itself, and what supervision is meant to hold in seasons of transition, vulnerability, or pause. Mateo’s peers in the supervision group felt comfortable with him remaining, trusting their established relationship and appreciating his consistent, meaningful contributions to their shared learning. His presence was understood, valued, and welcomed within the group.

However, outside the group, spiritual directors reacted differently. Some questioned

why a director without directees would participate in peer supervision, while others wondered whether spiritual direction alone was sufficient for Mateo at this stage. Others asked, “Wouldn’t individual supervision be better?” Many believed supervision was appropriate only for directors with active directees, and some felt uneasy about sharing vulnerable material with someone not currently practicing. These reactions reflect the varied assumptions spiritual directors hold about the purpose and scope of supervision and of the contemplative practice of spiritual direction itself.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCERNMENT

- How does your community or tradition define the purpose of peer supervision?
- Should participation in peer supervision require active directees?
- Would spiritual direction alone be sufficient for a spiritual director currently without directees?
- What would be most appropriate for a spiritual director who has paused their practice: individual supervision or peer supervision?
- How might supervision support directors when they pause their practice for any reason?
- What boundaries help maintain clarity and integrity when a director is on hiatus?



WHEN THE MINISTRY PAUSES

The questions above invite us to look beyond Mateo's situation and toward the broader rhythms of the ministry and contemplative calling of spiritual direction. Many spiritual directors encounter seasons when the work grows quiet. The chair across from us remains empty, the calendar unmarked, and the familiar rhythm of listening to another's sacred story pauses. These quiet seasons arise for many reasons. They may follow physical or mental health concerns, bereavement or major life transitions, sabbaticals or intentional rest, vocational discernment, relocation, shifting responsibilities, or moments when ethical prudence calls for a pause.

None of these circumstances negate a spiritual director's call; but rather, they signal a different season in the life of the ministry, one that can become deeply fruitful as the call to spiritual direction is gently reshaped from within. At first, this quiet can feel unsettling. Yet if we listen closely, we may sense that the silence is not an absence but an invitation, an opening within which the Spirit continues to work, gently reshaping our call to the ministry of spiritual direction. Such reshaping often requires accompaniment.

As the pause stretches, directors begin to notice what is stirring beneath the surface. Unresolved questions from past cases may come into clearer view, inviting ethical reflection on boundaries, choices, or moments that still carry weight. Emotional undercurrents that were easy to overlook in busier seasons—fatigue, self-doubt, longing for rest, or a quiet grief for what has shifted in one’s ministry—may also surface with new clarity. Over time, vocational questions may emerge, not demanding immediate answers but inviting curiosity about whether a new rhythm, a different posture of presence, or a deeper rooting in one’s spiritual life is being called forth. These movements are subtle and slow, unfolding in ways that resist quick conclusions.

Spiritual direction alone cannot hold all of this, as it focuses on the director’s relationship with God rather than on the complexities of the spiritual direction ministry. Spiritual direction supervision offers a steady, trustworthy space to explore these threads without urgency, allowing the director to remain present to what is unfolding and to gradually sense how the Spirit might be shaping the path ahead. Let us now explore how supervision provides this kind of grounded companionship and how a spiritual director without directees can still participate fully and contribute meaningfully within a peer supervision group.

A CONTEMPLATIVE UNDERSTANDING OF SUPERVISION

Drawing on James Neafsey’s contemplative approach to supervision, supervision can be understood as a sacred relationship of deep seeing and a space for discerning identity, vocation, and interior movements. It is a practice that draws forth and matures the director’s charism, a place where shadows and limits can be faced with love, and a mutual encounter shaped by grace rather than technique. It is less about oversight and more about beholding, less about correction and more about calling forth what is most true in the director (“Seeing Beyond,” 34–38).

When our spiritual companionship practice enters a lull and begins to notice unresolved questions, emotional undercurrents, or vocational stirrings, this contemplative stance becomes especially vital. Supervision, at its heart, is not merely guidance or problem-solving but a way of seeing beyond surface behaviors and into our own deeper spiritual identity. Neafsey describes this gaze as one that “sees through... below... behind... and beyond to the terrific thing there really is in me,” a way of beholding another with a depth of love and spiritual vision that arises as grace rather than technique (34).

Supervision in this contemplative sense does not center on correcting performance but on recognizing “the unique image of God at the core of the director,” a recognition that becomes the grounding point for discerning interior movements and vocational questions as they arise (38). From this deeper grounding, the director can listen more honestly to what begins to surface in the quiet of the pause.

In these quiet seasons, contemplative seeing helps draw forth the director’s charism—what the Christian faith calls the particular way they are called to love and serve—while also illumi-

nating the shadows, limits, and longings that emerge in the stillness (44–46). Through this gentle and spacious accompaniment, supervision supports the slow reshaping of the call to spiritual direction and invites the director to remain present to what is unfolding within and before them.

This contemplative understanding of supervision also has an important implication for peer-supervision groups: when supervision is rooted in deep seeing rather than in case analysis alone, the group retains its purpose even when no case is present. If supervision is fundamentally about beholding “the unique image of God at the core of the director” (38) and attending to the movements, questions, and vocational stirrings that arise within the director, the group does not depend on active directees to do its work. The contemplative stance itself becomes the content. In this light, gathering without a case is not a deficiency but an expression of the very heart of supervision—a communal space where directors can listen together for what is surfacing in their ministries, including in seasons of pause, and where the slow reshaping of the call to spiritual direction can be held with care and discernment.

According to Mary Rose Bumpus, many supervisory traditions in psychotherapy and pastoral care rely on models such as Lecturer, Teacher, Case Conference, or Monitor—approaches that assume the presence of a client or case and focus primarily on evaluating performance (“Supervision,” 22–23). She notes that much contemporary spiritual direction supervision unconsciously borrows from these psychotherapeutic frameworks, yet the most significant movements in spiritual direction supervision often arise not from case

analysis, but from attending to the director’s inner responses, imaginative processes, and the subtle work of the Holy Spirit on behalf of the “absent directee” (24–25).

For Bumpus, the “absent directee” is the person whose spiritual life the director accompanies and whose experience is held in supervision even though the spiritual directee is not physically present. Supervision thus becomes a contemplative space in which the director’s interior movements are explored on behalf of this unseen directee, trusting that the Spirit continues to work within the director-directee relationship even in memory and imagination (24–25).

For a spiritual director who currently has no spiritual directees, the notion of the absent directee widens: the absence itself becomes a site of discernment. The supervisory circle attends not to a particular case but to the director’s desires, resistances, and vocational questions, recognizing that the Spirit’s work persists even in seasons of pause. In this sense, the “absent directee” can name those who have not yet arrived—the ones awaited in hope, the as-yet-unknown directees for whom the director is quietly being prepared—allowing supervision to remain a place of formation, readiness, and communal accompaniment.

My study of supervision with Maria Tattu Bowen has deepened my understanding of supervision as an evocative, compassionate, and contemplative practice. This approach aligns with the concepts described by the previously mentioned authors. In Bowen’s teaching, I discovered a supervisory method that attends carefully to the spiritual director’s internal

poetry

A BLESSING FOR MY FELLOW LISTENERS

A blessing is a circle of light drawn around a person to protect, heal, and strengthen... The beauty of blessing is its belief that it can affect what unfolds... We use the word foreshadow for the imperfect representation of something that is yet to come. We could say that a blessing “forebrightens” the way.

—— John **O’Donohue** *To Bless the Space Between Us*

the next time you settle
in your chair
let this blessing nestle up close to you
let its peace
pour through you
let its sweetness
run across your tongue
tempering what you might speak
let it enlarge your heart
to hold all that the spirit
longs to give
let it drip
off your fingertips
planting its seeds
in your wake
let it be an anchor
thrown deep into the ocean
that is god

as your soul prepares a place
to welcome another soul
may this blessing linger
a reminder
that this sacred ministry of listening
is a grace
that meets you both
where you are
but does not leave anyone there
above all
may you know the presence
of the one who creates you
the one who loves you
the one who sustains you
amen

—— Kelly **Sollinger**

movements and questions before God, while maintaining a distinct purpose that differs from that of spiritual direction.

As mentioned above, the focus in spiritual direction is on the director's personal relationship with the Divine and the unfolding of their spiritual life. Supervision, by contrast, turns that same contemplative attention toward the ministry and practice itself: how the director's inner landscape shapes their capacity to listen, accompany, and remain ethically grounded. This distinction clarifies why supervision remains essential even when no directees are present, as it supports the director's ongoing formation and readiness.

INDIVIDUAL AND PEER SUPERVISION

When a spiritual director enters a season of without spiritual directees, the familiar rhythm of listening to another's sacred story gives way to a quieter, more interior landscape. The ministry does not disappear, it shifts inward. In this tender terrain, both individual supervision and peer supervision offer forms of accompaniment that help the director remain grounded, discerning, and connected to the deeper movements of vocation.

Individual supervision offers a focused, intimate space where the director can attend to the interior shifts that prompted the pause. In this one-to-one setting, the supervisor listens for how the director's inner landscape is shaping their capacity for presence—how grief, fatigue, longing, or uncertainty are moving within them and how these movements relate to their call. Because individual supervision centers on the director's ministry rather than their personal spiritual life, it becomes a place to explore ethical questions, vocational stirrings, and the subtle ways the Spirit may be inviting rest, integration, or new forms of presence. Without the pressure to bring a case, the director can name what feels unresolved or tender, trusting that the supervisor's contemplative attention will help illuminate what is unfolding within and before them.

Peer supervision also offers a distinct yet equally vital form of support. Within the circle of colleagues who share the joys and challenges of this path, directors remain connected to the communal dimension of the call. Even without directees, spiritual companions and directors can bring to peer supervision the movements that arise in the quiet—questions about readiness, shifts in desire, moments of resistance, and the grief that sometimes accompanies a pause. The group listens together for the Spirit's invitations, holding each person's experience with spaciousness and care. In this communal setting, we are reminded that this ministry is never carried alone; it is sustained by shared wisdom, mutual discernment, and the steady presence of companions who understand the terrain.

A spiritual director without directees can still contribute meaningfully when a peer presents a case. Even in a season of pause, they may bring years of listening, ethical reflection, and interior awareness that can illuminate subtle dynamics in the presenting director's relationship with their directee. Insights from the director's own journey—patterns they have noticed in themselves, questions that have shaped their practice, or movements of grace and resistance

they have learned to recognize—can offer the group a broader lens through which to view the case. In this way, the director participates not from the margins but from the depth of their lived formation.

The contribution of spiritual directors without directees also includes the quiet, steady roles that help hold the group together. Such a director can facilitate the session, guiding the group through its rhythm with clarity and gentleness. They can serve as a notetaker, gathering the questions and movements that arise so the presenting director can return to them later. They can offer the opening and closing prayer, helping the group settle into a posture of listening. These roles may seem small, but they are central to creating the attentive, reverent space in which peer supervision thrives.

Together, individual and peer supervision help the director remain rooted in the contemplative posture at the heart of spiritual direction. Individual supervision offers depth and focused discernment; peer supervision offers belonging and shared insight. Both affirm that the call to spiritual direction continues to unfold even when the chair across from the director is empty. By attending to what is surfacing within, the director remains open to the slow reshaping of vocation and is gently prepared for what will re-emerge in its own time.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

A spiritual director who is not currently seeing directees still carries the ethical commitments that define the ministry and con-

templative practice, which is why both peer supervision and individual supervision remain essential. Spiritual direction is grounded not only in active practice but in an ongoing posture of integrity, accountability, and vocational attentiveness. A season without directees often heightens responsibilities, inviting the director to tend the inner landscape from which future ministry will emerge. Even in a pause, several core ethical dimensions remain active:

Integrity of vocation: The director continues discerning their call, noticing shifts in desire, capacity, or readiness. Supervision provides a grounded space for this ongoing vocational listening.

Accountability to the ministry: Ethical practice requires staying connected to communal norms, shared wisdom, and oversight. Without directees, isolation can quietly take root; supervision keeps the director tethered to the relational fabric of the work.

Ongoing Formation: The Guidelines for Ethical Conduct of Spiritual Directors International emphasize lifelong growth in self-knowledge, freedom, and spiritual maturity. These movements do not depend on a caseload. Supervision supports the director's inner work, especially during transitional or liminal seasons.

Boundaries and readiness: Directors and companions must remain attuned to their energy, limits, and psychological landscape. Supervision surfaces blind spots and ensures that when directees return, the director is grounded, spacious, and ethically prepared.

Spiritual Directors International's *Guidelines for Ethical Conduct* explicitly state that spiritual directors “engage in supervision”

as part of their responsibility for personal growth and ongoing formation, without limiting this expectation to those currently seeing directees (2018). By framing supervision as a practice that safeguards integrity, nurtures self-knowledge, and supports vocational discernment, the Guidelines affirm its importance at all times. Periods without spiritual directees still raise questions of call, boundaries, readiness, and the director's relationship to their own spiritual life. Supervision ensures that the director remains accountable to the ministry, attentive to the ethical dimensions of the work, and prepared to re-enter direction relationships with clarity and integrity.

COMMUNAL AND PROGRAMMATIC ASPECTS

When a spiritual director enters a season without directees, the experience shapes both their personal discernment and the wider community that accompanies their ministry. Peer groups, formation programs, congregations, and professional networks all feel the effects of this pause. During this time, the director continues to uphold ethical responsibilities, and the community carries its own responsibilities for clarity, hospitality, and support. The way a community responds to a director in this season reveals what it believes about the ministry itself. Responses marked by discomfort or exclusion reflect a transactional understanding of spiritual direction, one tied primarily to active practice. Responses marked by welcome and steady support reflect an understanding of spiritual direction as a lifelong vocation sustained by ongoing formation and shared accountability, not solely by the presence of directees.

Peer supervision groups, in particular, are invited to communicate expectations with care and transparency. Clear norms help sustain trust when a director is not currently practicing. These norms may address how the director participates, what they may bring during a hiatus, and how the group can hold the interior movements that arise in stillness. Transparent communication allows the group to receive the director with ease, recognizing the value of their presence, listening, and reflective wisdom.

Formation programs also shape how pauses in ministry are understood. When programs frame seasons without directees as a natural rhythm rather than a setback, directors are more able to approach these times with openness rather than self-doubt. Programs can offer guidance on staying connected to supervision, discerning readiness to return to practice, and navigating ethical questions that arise during transitions. This perspective affirms that integrity, formation, and accountability remain central to the vocation, even when a director is not actively seeing directees.

Communities of practice—whether structured groups or informal circles of colleagues—offer essential spaces for listening and discernment. When these communities cultivate compassion and curiosity, they create room for directors to name limits, explore vocational questions, and attend to the quieter movements of the Spirit that surface. Such communities interrupt the iso-

Gathering without a case is not a deficiency but an expression of the very heart of supervision.

lation that can accompany a pause, reminding directors that the inner work continues even when the outer practice is still. In this way, the ministry is held collectively, honoring the unfolding within each director and affirming that a pause remains part of the call.

Taken together, community and programmatic support help sustain the integrity of the ministry. Shared commitment to clarity, care, and accountability reinforces the understanding that spiritual direction is a collaborative vocation rooted in communal discernment. When communities hold directors steady during seasons without directees, they foster an environment in which contemplative spiritual direction practice can continue to deepen and evolve while remaining attentive to the gentle movement of the Spirit.

HOLDING THE QUIET WITH INTEGRITY

A season without directees invites both the spiritual director and the wider community to remember that this ministry unfolds in rhythms rather than in continuous activity. The pause becomes a place of interior listening where questions of vocation, readiness, and desire surface with new clarity. Supervision—individual and communal—remains essential in this terrain, offering the steady

companionship and accountability that safeguard the director's integrity and support the slow reshaping of the call. When communities respond with clarity, hospitality, and trust, they affirm that spiritual direction is a lifelong vocation rooted in ongoing formation and shared responsibility. In honoring the quiet as part of the ministry's natural rhythm, the community helps the director remain grounded in the Spirit's gentle movement and prepared for the ministry that will emerge in its own time. ✱

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