According to Sister Janet Ruffing (West Midwest), “The spirituality ministry is where the deep transformative change happens.” Credit: Spiritual Directors International.

“The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC
The Roots of Mercy’s Spiritual Direction Ministry

For many years, the Sisters of Mercy have guided people like Mary to contemplate “the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” This contemplation is the core of spiritual direction and of the formation of spiritual directors. The unfolding of this ministry had its origins in the Ignatian Exercises, which have been for many a tool of spiritual awakening.

“The Jesuits realized after Vatican II that the Ignatian Exercises were originally given individually rather than preached,” explained Sister Kathleen McAlpin (Mid-Atlantic), who has the history at her fingertips. “When people experienced the Exercises in a personal way, they wanted ongoing spiritual direction. The Center for Religious Development (CRD) in Boston, Massachusetts, a program created by [Fathers] Bill Barry, SJ, and Bill Connolly, SJ, in 1971, began to answer the newly realized hunger for spiritual depth by training those who went on to train other spiritual directors.”

Three Sisters of Mercy who trained at CRD—Kathleen, Maureen Conroy (Mid-Atlantic) and Mary Ann Scofield (West Midwest)—spread out to develop programs to respond to a longing for spiritual depth and community. They wanted to prepare people to arrive at Buechner’s intersection of “deep gladness and deep hunger.”

Maureen was on the team with Father Jim O’Brien and Sister Janice Edwards (Mid-Atlantic) that developed the Upper Room diocesan program in 1979, joined later by Sister Maureen Christensen (Mid-Atlantic), who has ministered there for 20 years. At the time there were not many spiritual direction training or formation programs. Theirs was the first in New Jersey. The two-year program is rigorous: a series of 12 evening classes each year, readings, supervision, retreats and the experience of working with directees.

In addition to developing the Upper Room Spiritual Center, Maureen Conroy taught for many years at Creighton University and grounded that program in the vision of CRD.

Mary Ann Scofield responded to that deep hunger for spiritual growth when she returned to the fledgling Mercy Center in Burlingame, California, from CRD. She was part of a team that developed a program of formation which drew both lay and religious from all over the world.

The Burlingame program was intensive, requiring nine months of residence in the early 1990s, says Suzanne Buckley, now Mercy Center’s director. Suzanne was then atypical. “There were seven of us, and I was the only lay person,” she said. “Developed on the CRD model, it was a lot of practicum, input by real masters...”
and lots of supervision.”

Mary Ann became one of the wisdom figures of spiritual direction, nurturing the Burlingame programs, spreading the seed for new programs worldwide and traveling to train others in international sites. Mary Ann saw that more and more people were seeking spiritual directors because, as she said, “They are having experiences of God and don’t know where to have them tended.”

Kathleen McAlpin went on to teach in spirituality programs at Creighton University and assist in creating a spiritual direction program at Neumann College in Aston, Pennsylvania. She also created a diploma program in spiritual direction at Regis College in Toronto, Canada. Kathleen has supported a number of spiritual direction formation programs in several dioceses.

“The movement into the ministry [of spiritual direction] grew out of our own contemplative lives,” said Sister Janet Ruffing (West Midwest) former director of the spiritual direction program at Fordham University, who now teaches at Yale Divinity School. “It was a return to a profound spiritual work of Mercy in the 1970s. Both action and contemplation deepened simultaneously. Vocations started to drop off. Because space was available, formation centers became retreat and spirituality centers for a lot of religious orders throughout United States.”

Programs began springing up at Mercy spirituality centers from California to Connecticut. The Mercy charism flowered at a key moment in time, a flowering which the Sisters of Mercy were uniquely ready to nurture.

**TRAINING SPIRITUAL DIRECTORS**

At the time the sisters were active in new programs teaching spirituality and training directors, a need for a network of support for the directors themselves arose. A steering committee for a new organization, Spiritual Directors International, was formed. A member of the committee, Janet Ruffing said, “We were honoring the movement of the spirit in our midst and acknowledging that present times call for new responses.” At a conference in 1990, the interfaith Spiritual Directors International (SDI) was born at Mercy Center in Burlingame. SDI became an interfaith network of spiritual directors from all over the world who share information, training and support.

**MERCY RESPONDS TO THE SPIRITUAL NEEDS OF TODAY**

In the 21st century the movement of the spirit again calls for new responses. The programs are undergoing changes to meet the needs of those drawn to spiritual direction formation.

Those who come for formation are a mix of lay and religious from diverse faith traditions who cannot come for residential programs that are months long. They are often lay people who discern that they are called to juggle the ministry of spiritual direction with other parts of their lives. The programs are often organized as is the Upper Room program, a two-year structure with one class a month interspersed with retreats.

Other factors have encouraged a basic change in the programs. Spirituality centers have discovered that often people who hunger for spiritual direction formation need a background in theology and spirituality, and they are often seeking a spiritual community. Several centers have begun foundational programs that answer those needs. Four years ago, Mercy Center in Burlingame began a “Sacred Journey” program of basic theology and spirituality. The year-long program has been bursting at its seams. But out of the 150 people completing the program since its beginning, only 55 have gone on to the formation program. That fact has shaped programs in Burlingame and beyond.

The Bread of Life, a program in Sacramento, California, founded by Sandra Lommassen, who was trained by Mary Ann Scofield, has created “Listen to Your Life” for people who long for spiritual growth. Some participants go on to become spiritual directors, but others want simply this in-depth exploration of inner life. Madison’s Mercy Center has a School of Spirituality for spiritual growth separate from spiritual direction formation, “to deepen basic understanding about Christian history, scripture, spirituality prayer and mission.”

**YEARNING FOR SPIRITUAL DIRECTION**

The programs are meeting needs for an interior life that are not being filled in a traditional church setting, Catholic or Protestant. People may come to learn how to be a spiritual director, but the more immediate need is an immersion in faith. “There is a deep, deep hunger for people to talk about
their basic faith in Jesus Christ, but not within the context of theology or religious language,” observes Liz Lawhead, adjunct staff at Mercy Center Burlingame. “They want to talk about what change that faith makes in their daily lives. We do bridge work between theological tradition and the reality of their lives.”

A spiritual director trained at Bread of Life, Colleen Soracco was present with listening at a fragile moment in a young woman’s life. “I see few people in spiritual direction, but I use it so many other ways, including in my office. Recently a grocery store bagger insisted that she help me to my car. I realized she had something to say, and I wasn’t in a rush. I made eye contact and simply presented a non-judgmental space for her to talk. She said, ‘I had an abortion last week and I couldn’t tell my parents. You are the first person I told.’”

Buechner’s question resurfaces: “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” In her listening presence, Colleen was at that junction in the parking lot.

There is hunger in people to talk about their faith, and that listening can be done in a variety of ways. Some are called to be spiritual directors in a traditional sense with regular meetings with a directee. Others are called to contemplative listening more informally in their daily lives in hospices, prisons, hospitals. These variations on spiritual direction can be called spiritual companioning, spiritual listening, or mentoring, and programs have been developed to train people for these roles.

In a June 2003 article in Presence Magazine, Susan Loretta described a program at St. Thomas University in Miami, Florida, called Spiritual Companions in Daily Life. “The spiritual companions are trained to recognize and respond to the nascent desire and sometimes veiled cry for God by people they encounter at home, at work, at church, in other ministries, or in the wider community.”

WHERE IS SPIRITUAL DIRECTION HAPPENING?
The sites of these training programs are as precious as the formation itself. The spirituality and retreat centers founded and sponsored by the Mercys are essential to the faith life of whole Christian community. The centers must keep changing, discerning spiritual needs and balancing the budget with income-producing programs, such as offering conference services and training for industry leaders. Finances are an issue in keeping buildings and grounds maintained and staff supported. As Kathleen McAlpin wryly observed, the practical difficulty is that “very few people want to pay for God.”

Despite economic challenges, there are signs of vibrant life. Kathleen along with Mid-Atlantic Sisters Maria DiBello and Suzanne Neisser and executive director Veneta Lorraine are creating a new program at Cranaleith Spiritual Center. The hope is that it will be linked to the new Spirituality of Mercy theology courses at Georgian Court University in Lakewood, New Jersey. The Art and Practice of Spiritual Direction program began its two-year cycle at Mercy Center Burlingame in September 2014 and is completely full with a waiting list.

THE FUTURE OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTION
Given opportunity, people do respond to the invitation to explore their spirituality more deeply. As Mary Brown began the internship in her program, she invited people to be her directees from her parish pulpit. She was amazed that 18 people contacted her to inquire about direction. “And that was just from Christmas to New Year’s,” she said. “From one notice in the bulletin and one pulpit talk, I ended with six directees who stayed with me during the rest of the program.”

“The spirituality ministry is where the deep transformative change happens in the church,” says Janet. “It doesn’t tend to happen in the ordinary parishes. The spirituality ministry grows full adult Christian development rooted in contemplative life and is carried out in the world. It is the most radical ministry that we do.”

“The Mercy Sisters have provided integrated, holistic models for spiritual direction that are theologically sound,” said Suzanne Buckley. “Their ministry has been a gift.”

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Herman Melville wrote, “We cannot live only for ourselves.” Spiritual directors help seekers dig more deeply into their spiritual selves. Credit: Spiritual Directors International.