

EVOLVING APPROACHES TO SPIRITUAL DIRECTION IN SOUTH AFRICA

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A Complex, Diverse Context

IN SOUTH AFRICA a wide range of people are looking for ways to meet their spiritual needs. They come from different religious denominations, cultural and language groups, and geographical areas.

Apartheid divided people along racial lines in many ways, including geographically and, in practice, people from different race groups are still found concentrated in particular areas. The suburbs are still predominantly white and affluent, and people there tend to live without a strong or particularly developed sense of community with their neighbours.¹ People living in the townships are mostly black,² and there is generally a much more developed sense of community life, particularly among residents whose families have lived there for a number of generations—though this is beginning to break down to some extent. Many who live in the townships, especially young people, may be termed bi-cultural, as they have been shaped by the influence of both their traditional cultural heritage, impressed on them by their parents, and a rapidly evolving township culture which is strongly influenced by US television and access to social media.

The different race groups do not have single, homogeneous cultures within themselves. Black South Africans may come from Zulu, Sotho,

¹ Suburbs are wealthy middle- to upper-class areas. Formerly reserved for white people, they are still predominantly white, although some more affluent black people have moved into them.

² Townships were created under apartheid as separate areas on the outskirts of the cities where black people who travelled into the cities to find work were forced to live. Although this is no longer a matter of law, in practice almost everyone living in them is black, although there are also townships which are almost exclusively populated by people from Indian or so-called coloured (mixed race) backgrounds.

Xhosa, Venda or other backgrounds, all of which have distinct cultural identities. Those coming from rural areas tend to be significantly more in touch with traditional values, and have a greater sense of connection with the ancestors and with the practice of traditional rituals. Those living in the townships may be less connected with tradition or may adhere to a blend of practices and beliefs. A township person who is ill, for example, may choose to consult both a Western doctor and a traditional healer or *sangoma*.³ White people living in the suburbs also come from a range of cultural backgrounds including English, Afrikaans, Lebanese, Portuguese and so on. Adding to the complexity, many of those who are white and have lived in South Africa for generations self-identify as 'African', but this is not always recognised by black Africans. Cultures, too, are not static: in South Africa they are rapidly changing and what is true for one generation may not be true for the next.

It is critical that we do not lose sight of the complexity of the situation, especially when we make generalisations. South African society is evolving quickly and there are exceptions to every possible general statement. We must avoid any risk of boxing people into categories that determine what kind of spiritual accompaniment we think will be most helpful to them, recognising that South Africa is a country of great cultural diversity in which there are many influences at work. In the ministry of spiritual accompaniment it is important to meet people where they are and to help them to deepen their relationship with God. There is a saying in Sesotho, *ithute motho*, which means, 'be open to hearing from this particular person rather than making your own assumptions'. This is an important maxim for spiritual directors to heed. However, given that, in their historical separation, South Africans know very little about each other's cultural contexts, there remains a need for awareness-raising, especially as we seek to find ways sensitively to accompany people from our many different cultural contexts.

As spiritual directors trained in the Ignatian tradition living and working in South Africa, we recognise that the repertoire of modalities in

³ *Sangoma* is a Zulu term used to describe an African traditional healer. Such people, it is believed, are called by the ancestors (relatives who have lived honourable lives and who have died) to this role. They may be involved in the healing of physical, emotional and spiritual illnesses; counteracting witchcraft; diagnosing the causes of and resolving issues in the community; directing rituals, for example relating to birth and death, and narrating the history of the community. They may use such methods as dream interpretation, throwing the bones, burning special incense (*imphepo*) to summon the ancestors and making medicines from plants.

which we offer spiritual accompaniment must be expanded and developed if we are to meet the diverse needs of people living in suburban, township and rural contexts. Those of us in South Africa who train spiritual directors were generally trained ourselves in places such as the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada, and we are perhaps at risk of uncritically imposing a Western/Northern approach. It is important for us to reflect on how we can approach this ministry in ways that are shaped by and adapted to the African situation. This will necessarily also influence how we approach the training of directors. What we hope to do here is to present some of the cultural issues we have encountered through our research and accompaniment work in the suburban and township environments. These may be helpful in adapting approaches to the ministry of spiritual accompaniment in our diverse South African context. In particular we want to begin to consider the implications for developing this ministry by suggesting some possible new modalities of spiritual accompaniment.

Possible new modalities of spiritual accompaniment

In our work in the suburbs and townships of the Gauteng⁴ area, over some years now, we have begun to recognise some cultural factors which may have an influence on what people are seeking in relation to their spiritual lives. While remembering the complexities of the situation which make generalisations problematic, we now want to examine what someone coming from a township context might be seeking and what someone from a typical suburban context might be seeking.

The Townships

In research for the Jesuit Institute—South Africa we interviewed four categories of people in the townships in an effort to discover what kind of support they might be looking for in their spiritual lives. These were people who had attended parish retreats or an introductory training in spiritual accompaniment with us; priests; leaders of sodalities; and ordinary parishioners. We wanted to get a better sense of what township people are typically seeking in terms of their spiritual growth and what influence their cultural background has on this. How did these people normally go about getting what they need? Could we assume that they would want or need spiritual direction?

Some of the aspects which emerged most strongly were:

⁴ Gauteng includes Johannesburg, Soweto and Pretoria.

- Faith is rooted in and passed on through the family. Family prayer is still the norm.
- God is experienced as an integral part of life.
- People have a strongly transcendent image of God as Supreme Being, ‘protector’ and ‘provider’.
- They have a cosmological world-view in which attention is paid to the influence of spirits, both good and evil.
- People talk easily and readily about God in daily conversation.
- Community, healing and spiritual conversation are all important parts of the faith of township people.

Most people in the townships—and in the suburbs—do not know that spiritual direction exists. However in the townships people will share their faith readily and use the word ‘God’ frequently in conversation. They may have significant discussions about their life and faith (what one might term ‘spiritual conversations’) spontaneously in places such as a hospital waiting room or on a long taxi⁵ journey, perhaps confiding in a stranger.



⁵ Taxis here refer to minibuses, the most common mode of public transport in the townships.

Traditionally, when people need guidance they tend to seek out an elder, usually an older relative of the same gender. People may turn to a *sangoma* for help in understanding their situation and what the ancestors might be trying to communicate. They may also seek advice from their priest or pastor. Both traditional sources of wisdom (older relatives or community leaders and *sangomas*, who mediate the wishes of the ancestors) and church leaders are sought out in times of difficulty.

People most often seek the help of a wise person when they are confronted with a particular issue or concern, or at a particular moment of life transition. They tend to want to deal with a specific situation and are less likely to expect, or even want, an ongoing process. There is an expectation that a meeting may take hours or even days, but by the time the person leaves he or she expects to have received guidance or advice and to have some sense of closure or resolution. People want to tell their story, to be heard and to receive guidance on how to proceed. They may also come back to report on how things went and to thank the person who advised them. If a person goes to an elder to discuss a difficulty the elder will often prescribe a ritual, for example a stamping ritual to stamp out a bad dream or to rebuke an evil spirit.

Rituals are extremely important in traditional African cultures, even today, in particular for those living in rural areas. African life is permeated by ritual. Every significant event in the life of the individual and the community is marked or celebrated by means of a ritual. These include washing at a river to cleanse away a bad spirit (in Zulu, *ukugeza emfuleni*), burning traditional incense or slaughtering an animal—which can be part of a ritual either of cleansing a bad spirit or of thanksgiving. Rituals are intentional and sacred actions which help bring about the transition or healing which is sought.

Community is also a central value. The well-known proverb *umuntu ngumuntu ngubantu*, meaning that a person is a person through other people, powerfully expresses this. The community is seen as an extended family in which people support one another. People we interviewed, and also those who have taken part in some of the retreats offered in Soweto, affirmed that hearing the life and faith stories of others is uplifting and strengthening. The sense of solidarity in times of difficulty experienced through a group process is particularly vital. In part this feeling may have been strengthened by the importance of solidarity to surviving emotionally and spiritually in the abusive reality of apartheid. When asked why they attend church, the vast majority of those interviewed

gave as the primary reason the value they place on a shared community experience of God. In times of crisis the importance of community is especially evident. If there is a funeral, for example, everyone who had met the person or who knows the bereaved family (even indirectly) makes an effort to attend.

Communal meetings are a significant way in which people seek to have their spiritual needs met. Traditionally people used to go to *legotla* (gatherings) to talk about community concerns and issues. We discovered from our research in the townships that some people feel afraid of one-to-one encounters because of the historical experience of interrogation during the apartheid era and so feel safer in group contexts. For younger people who were born after the end of apartheid this may not present an obstacle; however for older people it may be more difficult to experience the sense of safety needed to share their stories in one-to-one spiritual direction.

Healing is a central concern for people, probably in part as a result of the exceptionally high levels of trauma in many township communities. People in the townships still bear the trauma of apartheid, but there is also a continued experience of social ills rooted in the same history. Culturally, healing is strongly linked to the sense of community, and generally involves reconciliation either with the community of the living or with the ancestors. One of the key things that people are looking for when they attend church services, or when they come to an older person to talk about what matters to them, is a sense of healing. Often after expressing something particularly painful and having felt heard they will say 'I feel healed'.

In seeking to understand the cultural context of those in the townships better we have reached these tentative conclusions. For indigenous African people there is no distinction between faith and life. In the township context finding God in all things is the people's basic attitude, though this seems to be being eroded for the younger generation. The experience of God is strongly connected with the experience of community. The journey of life and relationship with God is not made in isolation but is integrally connected with other people. People instinctively seek out group contexts in which to express their faith. The existing ways in which they look for guidance and support tend to be within the family or community, where older relatives or elders may be approached. Rituals may be used in making transitions and in seeking healing and reconciliation.



The Suburbs

So, recognising the many exceptions that exist, what does the typical person from the suburbs seem to be seeking in relation to his or her spiritual growth? The majority of the people we encounter from the suburbs tend to be white, well-educated, reasonably affluent and middle-aged or older. They come explicitly seeking help in developing their relationship with God and their life of prayer.

Although most of those here who seek out spiritual direction are still anchored in a church community, there is generally a sense in which they see the development of their relationship with God as a personal and individual process much more than a communal one. Those who come for spiritual direction tend to look for ‘an expert’, someone who is trained or qualified as a spiritual director. Unlike the majority in the townships, they often place less value on age and more on qualifications and experience.

In the suburbs people are living in an increasingly secularised context which is influenced by a postmodern world-view suspicious of grand narratives. Where people practise their faith they tend to do so privately. Many will talk about spirituality and religion as distinct from each other, some saying that they want to develop their spirituality but are not comfortable with church or institutional religion. While most of those who choose to come for spiritual direction are part of a church community,

often they are struggling with how to live their faith in a context in which family and friends may no longer see faith or church as something of value.

Many, particularly among the more affluent, increasingly do not see any particular need for God in their lives and no longer attend church regularly. Their lives tend to be dominated by the stresses of intensive work and the superficial connections of social media. For some, however, there is a strong emphasis on personal and spiritual development. Psychotherapy and life coaching are used increasingly as means of personal development. These processes tend to be individual and ongoing, with a specific focus. So for those who look for help with their prayer lives a similar approach to spiritual direction, meeting at regular intervals over a period of time, is likely to feel quite familiar and comfortable.

Those who seek out spiritual direction are often looking for meaning and purpose in their lives and want to discover what they are meant to do or be in the world. Unlike most people in the township setting, they often compartmentalise the different aspects of their lives and find it difficult to integrate faith with life. Many feel overwhelmed by the pace of their lives and find it difficult to make time and space to attend to their relationship with God. A regular, time-limited slot for individual spiritual direction seems to meet the needs of people who have little free time. Recent shifts towards the professionalisation of spiritual direction, with formal training programmes, payment for sessions, ongoing professional development and supervision of spiritual directors, fit more easily with the world-view of those coming from a suburban context.

Implications for Spiritual Accompaniment

Given South Africa's cultural diversity, it would seem important to develop a number of modes of spiritual accompaniment better to meet the needs of different people. We would like to propose five modes of spiritual accompaniment (though others are possible). We are not in any way suggesting that these modes are bound to a particular culture or exclusive, but we recognise that preferences for one rather than another may be influenced by cultural background. We are aware of a need to be open to the diverse ways in which the Holy Spirit is at work in people's lives. Rather than offering only one approach to spiritual direction, it seems that the richness and complexity of our context invite us to listen creatively to the Spirit and together to evolve a variety of approaches that respond sensitively to this particular person and his or her way of encountering God, which may in part be mediated by culture.

1. Spiritual Direction

This involves regular one-to-one spiritual accompaniment in which the role of the director is to help the person to reflect on the activity and invitation of God in his or her life. It is an approach to spiritual accompaniment as it has developed in recent times and which would be familiar to most spiritual directors trained in the Ignatian tradition in places such as the United Kingdom and the United States. It is defined by Barry and Connolly in their seminal work *The Practice of Spiritual Direction* as,

... help given by one Christian to another, which enables that person to pay attention to God's personal communication to him or her, to respond to this personally communicating God and to live out the consequences of the relationship. The *focus* of this relationship is on experience, not ideas, and specifically on religious experience. This experience is viewed not as an isolated event, but as an expression of the ongoing personal relationship God has established with each one of us.⁶

This is the mode for which spiritual direction training has thus far primarily focused on equipping directors. Spiritual direction from this perspective, though it usually takes place in the context of a broader faith community, is a personal and individual process that happens within an ongoing relationship in which director and directee meet at regular intervals for an agreed period of time, perhaps an hour to an hour and a half, usually on a monthly or six-weekly basis. Although anything in the person's experience may be appropriate matter for spiritual direction, the focus is on spiritual experience. How does whatever I am experiencing affect my relationship with God?

The role of the spiritual director in this mode is not to solve problems or to give advice, but rather to accompany people as they seek to discover God's desires for them through prayer and reflection on experience. It is also influenced to some degree by modern psychological understandings. The person attends regularly and not only when there is a specific issue to be addressed. The director listens and helps the directee to notice interior shifts or movements and to reflect on what God might be saying.

⁶ William A. Barry and William J. Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction* (New York: Seabury, 1982), 8–9.

In adapting this mode in an African context directors need to be sensitive to the centrality of family and community. For both black and white directees from strongly community-based cultures it may be more helpful to ask first, not ‘How are you?’ or ‘How is your prayer going?’, but rather, ‘How is your family?’ Among those who come to the Jesuit Institute seeking spiritual accompaniment are people from both suburban and township contexts who have found this approach extremely valuable. For some, however, the idea of meeting in a regular, relatively structured way is so alien that it is not experienced as helpful. For such a person a different approach to spiritual accompaniment seems to be needed.

2. *Spiritual Conversation: puisano ka se Moya*⁷

Ignatius engaged in spiritual conversation as early as his time in Manresa, and he clearly saw it as vitally important. This mode is closer in some respects to Ignatius’ understanding of spiritual conversation than to the more structured relationship we have come to name spiritual direction.

Some people may not be looking for spiritual accompaniment in the form of an ongoing structured relationship as in the first mode. They are often seeking a wise person to consult when they experience a block or a difficulty in their lives. To respond to this need perhaps a form of spiritual conversation—in Sesotho *puisano ka se Moya*—may be most helpful. In this mode of spiritual accompaniment the person being accompanied may come for one-off spiritual guidance in a single session or may come a number of times, but only when a particular issue arises about which he or she wishes to seek guidance.

Important elements in this mode are listening to the person’s story, giving some words of wisdom or advice, and some form of ritual or prayer where appropriate. It is important to have enough time for directees to share their stories and to feel heard. To share one’s story is a powerful and liberating activity which allows people to claim their experience and to have their feelings about that experience validated. Where people have felt themselves to be silenced, as under apartheid, the space to tell their story in as much detail as they wish is a gift in which their experience is honoured as important. In this case an open-ended session is needed, so that directees feel that they have been able to speak as much as they need to. The process of telling appears to be extremely helpful, often giving a sense of catharsis and of integration. Directees are likely to want

⁷ This is a Sesotho phrase that captures the idea of ‘spiritual conversation’.

to speak, uninterrupted, for a considerable period. They are unlikely to find the listening skills of reflecting back or summarising particularly helpful. This calls for a real capacity to listen and concentrate for a long period on the part of the director.

Once the story has been heard, directees expect (as in the old tradition of the Desert Fathers or Mothers) wise words or counsel. Western-trained guides are often reluctant to see themselves as people who have wisdom, but from an African cultural perspective this seems to be what directees seek and expect when they ask someone for help. This help does not necessarily need to be problem-solving, but counsel as to what God might be asking or saying, or specific guidance about how to take things forward. Not to offer this is to send the person away feeling 'empty'. In the same way that they might visit an elder or a *sangoma*, directees want to come to a spiritual director as someone with greater wisdom and life experience than themselves. Age is an important factor here. In traditional African cultures wisdom is regarded, to a large extent, as a function of age. While priests are generally seen as having God-given authority, and automatically have elder status by virtue of their ordination, a young lay director may not be experienced as a person of wisdom, though this is slowly changing.

In the spiritual conversation mode the director may pray with the directee (perhaps with laying on of hands or a blessing), or suggest a ritual for the person to go away and perform to help bring healing or resolution. Someone whose culture uses ritual to mark significant shifts may be greatly helped at the end of a spiritual conversation by a ritual that expresses the grace he or she is seeking.⁸ Very often the ritual is not an individual action but one



A sangoma

⁸ This is especially true of some people from rural contexts and from the townships, generally older people.

done with others in the community. It may be sharing a meal with someone to whom one wishes to be reconciled or, when dealing with a bereavement, going to pray at the grave of the person who has died, and so on. The use of different forms of ritual can be extremely helpful for directees from all backgrounds. However it is important for a director to remember that in certain cultural contexts ritual is so significant that without it people may not feel the sense of resolution or healing that they need.

3. Guided Faith-Sharing

**Sharing
the story of
how God is
at work in
my life**

A group approach respects the central place of community in African culture, and the importance of sharing the story of how God is at work in my life with others on the journey. In this mode several people (perhaps six or eight) meet on a regular basis to share what is happening in their lives and what it means for their relationship with God, and to seek guidance for the development of that relationship. Initially the group spiritual guide is the person who responds with wisdom to what is shared and guides not only the individuals in the group but also the group process itself. As time progresses others in the group may be able to offer their wisdom too. In those cultural contexts that are particularly age-sensitive, it may be more helpful to have people of a similar age in the same group. A shared meal at the end of the group meeting may be an important aspect of the process, as hospitality and the sharing of meals are particularly significant in African culture. For this to function as a mode of spiritual accompaniment there needs to be some sense of the individuals in the group being on a spiritual journey and the guide or director facilitating that process.

4. Legotla—Individual Focus

This mode of direction involves discernment for and with an individual by a group of elders. *Legotla* is a Sesotho word; the Zulu word *imbizo* captures the same idea. This mode is derived from traditional gatherings in rural areas. A *legotla* is called to discuss a specific issue affecting an individual or the whole community, and the elders or leaders of the family or community come together. In traditional African culture there is a strong sense that people do not make significant decisions in isolation from the community but as part of it, and that it is the elders who have the wisdom to make such decisions.

In this proposed mode of spiritual accompaniment a person comes to a spiritual director and asks for a *legotla* about a significant decision with which he or she needs help. The spiritual director decides together with the person which wise members of the person's family or community should be invited to the session. At the *legotla* the person is invited to talk about the issues around the decision that he or she wants to make. The people being consulted listen—trying to sense the movement and invitation of the Holy Spirit. There is then a time of prayer in the group, calling on the wisdom of the ancestors and of the Holy Spirit. Discussion takes place, facilitated by the spiritual director, until resolution is reached. Possibly the individual and the community might go away to pray and return for a second meeting. The community, who know this person and the context, will help the person to discern. If appropriate a ritual will be suggested.

There are certainly a number of potential problems with this proposed mode. The community to which the person belongs would need to be open to such a process and to the spiritual director facilitating it. They would also need to be open to the individual concerned being part of the process. How far communities would accept the spiritual guide as 'an elder', whom they would trust to facilitate such a process, is not clear. However what is clear is that for a young person to go away from the community (for example on retreat or in an individual discernment process) and make a key decision in isolation from them goes strongly against traditional cultural values. Exploring this mode as an alternative might enable discernment to happen in a way that is connected with the family and community, avoiding the often very painful internal and external dissonance frequently experienced when people from traditional African backgrounds discern apart from the community.

5. Legotla—Group Focus / Communal Discernment

This mode is derived from two sources: traditional African and Ignatian. The African practice of *legotla* is combined with the Ignatian process of communal discernment, in which a community who need to make a decision for the group may engage in an intensive process of prayer and of listening together for God's invitation. Each person considers the issues in prayer, listening to the movement of the spirit, trying to sense where the deepest peace or spiritual consolation is, and shares that process within the group. The group listen to each other so as to be able to try to sense and choose what God desires for them.

In this proposed mode a community or group gather to discern together about a decision that affects the whole group. Facilitated by the spiritual director the group share their feelings about the issue affecting them. In between sharing and discussion they pray individually and together. The director helps the community to listen for which option will bring the greatest peace and sense of reconciliation or direction to the community. The group continue to meet until they have discerned God's desire for them. The process could continue over hours or even days, until a conclusion is reached. (In some contexts, for example in the suburbs, the group may instead meet several times for shorter periods of time such as once a week for several weeks.) If appropriate there may be a ritual that the community perform together.

The Gift of Diversity

We began by acknowledging the complexities involved in considering questions of culture in relation to spiritual direction. Nonetheless, drawing on reflection on the work of the Jesuit Institute—South Africa, in both suburbs and townships, we need to consider the expectations and desires that many people coming from these diverse contexts have in relation to their spiritual growth, and how we might be more responsive to those needs for spiritual accompaniment.

We have already been using elements of some of these proposed modes in our practice, for example the 'spiritual conversation', which has evolved as white and black directors from a variety of cultural traditions have reflected on their experience and on what the people coming to see them have found helpful. The inculturated Weeks of Prayer in the townships, called *Tsoseletsa* Weeks,⁹ and the training course for people who wish to offer such weeks of prayer in parishes have also provided the opportunity to confirm how helpful a narrative approach is within a group context. However to discover what is helpful we still need to apply all of these modes over time and see how they evolve in practice. The challenge is then how to train directors in a variety of different modes of spiritual accompaniment. Group skills, discernment of spirits in a group context, an understanding of traditional cultural issues and the

⁹ *Tsoseletsa* is a Sesotho word which means 'to revive or renew'. This is an inculturated parish retreat developed by the Jesuit Institute—South Africa. It is a group process over a week in which every night an input is given on an aspect of Ignatian spirituality and there is the opportunity for sharing within smaller groups.

appropriate use of ritual are only some of the aspects that would become essential learning for the spiritual director. It is an exciting and challenging journey and we are very much still at the starting blocks.

The meditation on the incarnation in the Spiritual Exercises invites us to imagine the persons of the Holy Trinity looking down on the world and seeing the various persons on the earth,

... in all their diversity of dress and appearance, some white and some black, some in peace and others at war, some weeping and others laughing, some healthy, some sick, some being born and some dying ... and the Divine Persons saying 'Let us bring about the redemption of humanity' (Exx 106–107).

In this meditation there is a recognition of our diversity and the great gift of that diversity. Our different cultural perspectives can expand our understanding and experience of God, in whose image we are created. The danger of a Western approach to individual spiritual direction is that we can too easily forget that we are communal beings and thus live lives that are not relational. The danger of over-emphasizing the African belief that God is found in community is to forget that God can also communicate God's self to the individual. Both perspectives have value and can enrich each other.

In the *Spiritual Exercises* and the *Constitutions* Ignatius placed great emphasis on the director's or superior's sensitivity to what will help a particular person to grow in his or her relationship with God. Ignatius encourages us always to be ready to adapt our approaches according to what will be of most help to this individual (and perhaps also, in this context, to this community). According to the Ignatian scholar Philip Endean, 'at the heart of this there is a sense of reverence for how God's spirit can be at work in the person one meets, in ways that may in principle be surprising, unpredictable and new'.¹⁰ We are called to listen attentively for the Spirit's leading and to apply the insights of Ignatian spirituality in our context, seeing how 'the Creator deals directly with the Creature' (Exx 15).

At the recent conference on Spiritual Direction in the African Context, it was evident that there is an urgent need for us to evolve a variety of creative and culturally sensitive ways to respond to people's

¹⁰ Philip Endean, "'Applying Such Exercises': Early Jesuit Practice", *Review of Ignatian Spirituality (CIS)*, 32/3 (2001), 46.

desire for spiritual accompaniment. This can only happen if we trust the Spirit enough to dare to try new approaches. Then, in reflecting on our experience and engaging in dialogue with other directors from our many cultural backgrounds, we may begin to develop an integrated approach to spiritual accompaniment that truly respects and honours the richness of our cultural diversity.

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