



Spiritual Care Roles and Ethical Guidelines: Context Summary

Background Context

OneSpirit Interfaith Foundation has been navigating the complex terrain of spiritual care terminology, particularly around "spiritual counselling," which we have previously avoided due to trustee concerns about public expectations and potential liability issues – this dates back to around 2018.

The Core Challenge

The organisation faced tension between:

- **Spiritual freedom:** Honouring that ministry is a calling with diverse expressions
- **Public responsibility:** Ensuring safeguards and clarity to maintain trust in OneSpirit and OneSpirit ministers

This led to a comprehensive review of spiritual care roles and their ethical implications.

Key Distinctions in Spiritual Care Roles

Spiritual Counselling: Integrates spiritual perspectives into supportive relationships, may include therapeutic elements if practitioner has appropriate training.

Spiritual Direction: Traditional practice focusing on discerning divine presence and movements in one's life, emphasising contemplative listening rather than problem-solving.

Spiritual Accompaniment: Broadly inclusive term for walking alongside someone's spiritual journey, often more mutual and interfaith-friendly than traditional direction.

Spiritual Coaching: Forward-looking and goal-oriented, helping identify and achieve spiritual objectives or life purpose.

It should be noted that all of these roles will carry public expectations of professional competence, while there may be little understanding of what that looks like in terms of training and certification. This could be a particular concern with regard to *spiritual counselling*, as the word 'counselling' may lead to an assumption that the practitioner is qualified to offer psycho-therapeutic services, which may not always be the case. We recognise that:

- Ministers *without* a psycho-therapeutic background and relevant training, may be offering an extremely high quality and beneficial spiritual counselling service that is focussed on their clients' spiritual needs and does not seek to address psycho-therapeutic issues.

- Ministers *with* a psycho-therapeutic background and relevant training may be offering highly innovative and beneficial services that combine spiritual counselling with psycho-therapeutic approaches.

The aim here is to make that distinction clear for clients.

Critical Ethical Issues

- **Scope of Practice:** Practitioners must operate within their competence and make appropriate referrals
- **Power Dynamics:** Spiritual guidance involves inherent power imbalances requiring careful ethical management
- **Safeguarding:** UK charity law requires robust safeguarding policies for all who come into contact with the organisation
- **Terminology Impact:** Terms like "counselling" carry public expectations that create both opportunities and risks

The Resolution: Reclaiming "Spiritual Counselling"

After review, OneSpirit's trustees gave tentative approval for ministers to use the term "spiritual counselling" to describe their services, provided they clearly communicate what they do and don't offer based on their actual qualifications and training.

'Boilerplate' Statements Developed

For Ministers WITH Psychotherapy Background:

"I offer spiritual counselling that integrates psycho-therapeutic support with spiritual guidance. My approach addresses both your emotional wellbeing and spiritual development, drawing on my training in [specific qualification/approach] alongside my interfaith ministry formation. This service may include therapeutic techniques to support healing whilst exploring how your spiritual beliefs and practices can enhance your overall wellbeing. I work collaboratively with other healthcare professionals when appropriate."

For Ministers WITHOUT Psychotherapy Background:

"I offer spiritual counselling focused on supporting your spiritual wellbeing and growth. This is a non-judgmental space to explore your spiritual journey, beliefs, and practices. I do not provide mental health treatment or therapy. If you are experiencing mental health concerns or trauma, I encourage you to seek appropriate professional support whilst I can complement that care by focusing on your spiritual needs and questions."

Why These Statements Are Needed

1. **Legal Protection:** Clear communication prevents mismatched expectations that could lead to complaints or liability issues

2. **Ethical Practice:** Ensures ministers operate within their competence and make appropriate referrals
3. **Public Trust:** Honest representation builds confidence in interfaith spiritual care
4. **Professional Development:** Encourages ministers to be clear about their own skills and limitations
5. **Organisational Resilience:** Protects OneSpirit's reputation whilst allowing ministerial diversity

Key Principles for Ethical Spiritual Care

- Clear role definition and boundaries
- Appropriate training matched to services offered
- Regular supervision and peer accountability
- Adherence to ethical guidelines
- Transparent communication about services
- Robust safeguarding policies

This framework represents a mature approach to spiritual care that honours both its sacred nature and its responsibility to those seeking support, creating what might be called "bounded freedom" - clear enough structures to ensure safety, flexible enough to honour diverse spiritual gifts.