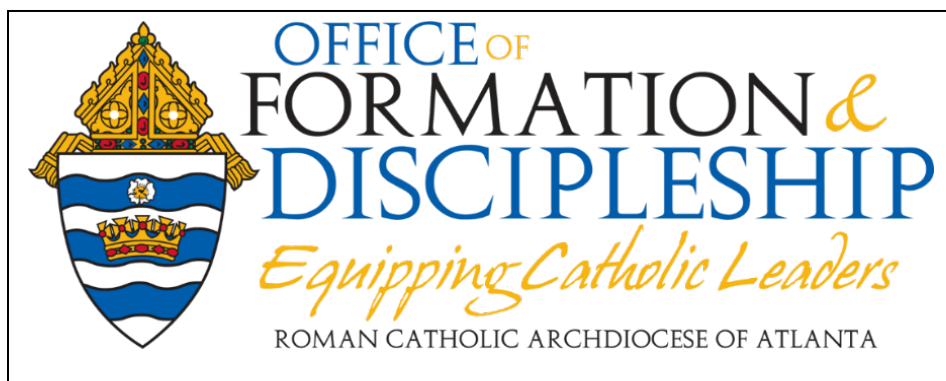


LAUNCHING A PARISH-BASED
SPIRITUAL CALL COMPANIONS MINISTRY:

A GUIDE FOR COMPASSIONATE AND
EFFECTIVE ACCOMPANIMENT BY PHONE



INTRODUCTION

Visiting the sick, homebound, elderly, and their caregivers has for many parishes been an active and growing ministry, extending the body of Christ into the community. In times and circumstances when in-person visits are not possible, Christ's presence can still be made visible in many creative, enriching, and effective ways.

One such way is equipping the laity with formation and training resources to reach out by phone or video chat technology to fellow parishioners with spiritually-focused call visits. The purpose of the spiritual call visit is to assure people of God's active presence in their lives and to cultivate an ongoing sense of spiritual community. Call companion encounters are meant to fill the gap between a friendly, social check-in and a visit from a trained and/or credentialed pastoral counselor, spiritual director, or chaplain.

This guide is not meant to be comprehensive in nature, but, rather, to serve as an introduction and best-practices overview to further this type of ministry tailored to the specific needs and available resources of an individual parish. We pray it provides guidance, encouragement, and opens up opportunities to expand in the future.

Prior to beginning a Spiritual Call Companion Ministry, be sure to seek the approval and support of the parish pastor,

who is responsible for all parish ministries. Explaining the need and vision, including a copy of this Guide as a resource, will help facilitate those conversations.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A CALLER

Above all, a spiritual call companion is, as Pope Francis describes, a person willing to enter into the “‘art of accompaniment’... before the sacred ground of the other (cf. Ex 3:5).” A spiritual call companion is “steady and reassuring, reflecting our closeness and compassionate gaze which also heals, liberates, and encourages growth in the Christian life” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 169).

Through active listening and prayer, a spiritual call companion makes Christ’s presence known to those persevering through various trials and joys associated with illness, disability, isolation, loneliness, loss, aging, worry, caregiving, grief, recovery, milestones, and other related issues. By no means is a spiritual call companion required to be an expert in these areas, and a spiritual call companion is not a substitute for a professional counselor.

In practical terms, a call companion is someone who is comfortable speaking on the phone or using video chat technology. A call companion should also have the ability to dedicate focused time to the ministry, forming an ongoing Christ-centered relationship that deepens over time.

Since calls will largely involve contact with vulnerable people, the Archdiocese of Atlanta requires that all spiritual

call companions be Safe Environment cleared including background check and VIRTUS training. *(Please note: The spiritual call companion ministry, as described in this guide, is distinct from occasional check-in calls on behalf of the pastor or crisis situations that arise and require a parish to mobilize a large number of parishioners to call and check in with the homebound. This guide can assist in training and best practices for anyone engaged in calls with the homebound and others, but it envisions a longer-term ministry and accompaniment where possible.)*

MINISTRY COORDINATION & CALLER RECRUITMENT

A pastor will identify a spiritual call companion coordinator to facilitate the ministry either from existing staff or as a volunteer. Most parishes already have a cadre of people ready, and, with some additional formation, guidance, and support, able to serve as spiritual call companions. Examples of existing parish ministries from which to recruit spiritual call companions include:

- Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion to the Sick & Homebound
- Stephen's Ministers
- Catechists and RCIA Instructors
- Senior Adult Ministers
- Widowed Ministry
- Campus & Young Adult Ministers
- Pastoral Care Staff and Volunteers
- Grief Ministers
- St Vincent de Paul Volunteers
- Knights of Columbus
- Diaconate
- Caregivers Support Groups

The coordinator can work with these existing ministries to recruit potential spiritual call companions, share this formation material, and provide a measure of ongoing logistical support. In some cases, it may make the most sense to have an existing ministry such as the Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion to the Sick & Homebound, to be the primary ministry coordinating the spiritual call companions.

Coordinators can facilitate Safe Environment clearance, volunteer training, call scheduling, and reporting of call visits. One parish found that using a shared Google spreadsheet was the most accessible and familiar way to coordinate volunteers. Utilizing FlockNotes or pastoralparish.com may also be an option, if available. Coordinators can also serve as a clearing-house for issues that arise requiring additional assistance beyond the scope of a call companion's role (See **Addressing Concerns** below.)

IDENTIFYING PEOPLE TO BE CALLED

Some parishes may already have a database (e.g. ParishSoft) of names and phone numbers of those to receive an initial call. Lists could be generated of older adults (e.g., everyone aged 65+), the widowed, and the homebound (including long-term care residents in parish boundaries). Lists could also be generated from participants in the ministry groups listed under **Characteristics of a Caller**

above. The initial inquiry call would describe the ministry and asking if the person is interested in future calls.

Attached as Appendix A is an example of a Parish Phone Call Script from the Archdiocese of Washington, DC which can be modified as appropriate for a parish making initial inquiry phone calls. Be sure to emphasize the spiritual resources available with a specific question, “Would you be interested in receiving ongoing spiritual companion calls?”

Announcements could be placed in the parish bulletin, website, and other social media, or part of parish live-streamed Masses. Keep in mind that relatives, friends, and caregivers may be the ones identifying those who would like to receive calls so it may be a good idea to address some communication specifically to them. Provide a contact name, phone number, and/or email address so follow-up and assignments can be made. Some parishes may already

be able to create an online registration form to speed up the process. An example announcement appears below.

EXAMPLE ANNOUNCEMENT

Are you, a loved one, or friend unable to receive in-person visitors but interested in connecting via phone with a Spiritual Call Companion? Spiritual Call Companions seek to make regular calls to share prayer time and devotions as well engage in friendly, Christ-centered conversation. Contact [insert name and contact info] for more information.

PREPARING FOR THE CALLS

Recognizing the sacred nature of the entire encounter about to happen - from saying hello to saying goodbye - a spiritual call companion should take a few moments prior to the call to prepare. Preparations include:

- Being in a quiet place free of distractions, including background noises (e.g., televisions, cell phone notifications, pets, other people, etc.) so as to offer full attention during the whole call;
- Reviewing any notes about the person being called;

- Reviewing any Scriptural, prayer, music, or devotional material to be used; and
- Taking a few moments to sit in silence, breathing deeply, and calling upon the Holy Spirit to participate in the call encounter.

CALL COMPONENTS

Similar to an in-person visit, the most fruitful spiritual call sessions will have discernable components and flow. Calls can range from a few minutes to up to an hour. The spiritual call companion is responsible for setting the pace, always monitoring cues from the person being called.

A recommended schedule or “rhythm” of the call is as follows:

1. **Introduction.** Clearly state your whole name and ministry affiliation. For example, “My name is _____ and I’m a spiritual call companion from _____ Catholic Church, calling you on behalf of our pastor, _____” In some cases, it might be necessary to re-introduce yourself if the person being called is experiencing cognitive issues.

If this is your first call, especially with a person who has been recommended by another family member, friend, or acquaintance, please be mindful of the possibility that a person may not understand the ministry fully or wish to have a conversation at the moment. If you sense that a person does not feel comfortable with your call, it may be helpful to simply

note that you are calling on behalf of your pastor to check in and pray for prayer intentions. If further conversation does not appear to be welcomed, simply convey continued prayers and thanks on behalf of the pastor before ending the call. Then, follow up with the ministry coordinator.

2. **Building Rapport.** Leave a short amount of time to ease into the time together by initiating friendly conversation. Follow up on any previous conversations you may have had. Ask open-ended questions that will bring forth more response than “yes,” “no,” or “fine.” For example, “How are you feeling today?” The response to this question will likely provide some cues about the person’s openness to further conversation that day.

This may be an appropriate time to share news of the parish, extending the parish Eucharistic community. Ideas include Baptisms, events, birthdays, prayer requests, etc. The parish bulletin may be a good source of news and updates. Just remember that all news should be “public” in nature to respect confidentiality.

3. **Transition to Formal Faith Sharing.** You might say something like, “Shall we pray together now? Do you have any prayer intentions you’d like to pray for today?” Allow time for response and even propose some intentions they may have prayed for in the past (for example, pain relief, a grandchild, etc.).

Begin with making the Sign of the Cross: "In the Name of the Father,..." Offer praise and thanksgiving to God and name specific blessings, especially for the time to converse together and share the faith. Offer up prayer intentions.

4. **Main Spiritual Time.** The focus of this time can take many forms, but should be intentional and appealing to both parties on the call. Remember the role of spiritual call companion is not to be a catechist, homilist, or counselor but a fellow journeyer. Several ideas and resources for this time are listed below.

It may take a bit to discover what works best for a given relationship. For example, some people may be drawn easily into a discussion of a Gospel reading, while others may find comfort in consistently praying the Rosary together. Simply asking the person being called what devotions or practices they have benefited from in the past will help lead this part. Some people may also be willing to be introduced to new practices, so be open to a variety of possibilities to see what is fruitful.

Flexibility throughout the whole call, and at this time in particular, is important. For instance, a spiritual call companion may come prepared to share about the saint of the day, but pick up on cues that the person being called wants to spend extra time sharing a happy story of a recent birthday celebration or memories of childhood. By all means, spend time in conversation about the stories and shorten or eliminate the planned topic.

5. **Transition to Closing.** When it's time to end the call, clearly thank the person for the time together. Assure them of your ongoing prayers. Confirm, if possible, the next time you will call.

After the call, if applicable, report to the ministry coordinator using any specified method in place.

SPIRITUAL & DEVOTIONAL RESOURCES

USCCB Daily Lectionary Readings - www.usccb.org/bible/readings/

Rosary - www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/prayers-and-devotions/rosaries/index.cfm

Chaplet of Divine Mercy - www.thedivinemercy.org/

Saints - www.franciscanmedia.org/source/saint-of-the-day/; www.catholic.org/saints/

Daily Examen - www.ignatianspirituality.com/

Lectio Divina - www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/prayers-and-devotions/meditations/index.cfm

Reflections and other resources - www.wordonfire.org

Archdiocese of Atlanta Evangelization Website - www.evangelizationatl.com/

IMPROVING LISTENING SKILLS AND BUILDING RAPPORT

“We need to practice the art of listening, which is more than simply hearing. Listening, in communication, is an openness of heart, which makes possible that closeness without which genuine spiritual encounter cannot occur. Listening helps us to find the right gesture and word, which shows that we are more than simply bystanders. Only through such respectful and compassionate listening, can we enter on the paths of true growth and awaken a yearning for the Christian ideal: the desire to respond fully to God’s love and to bring to fruition what he has sown in our lives.”

-Pope Francis, Evangelii Gaudium, no 171

Following are several suggestions for improving the “art” of active, sacred listening, and for growing a trusting, positive rapport over time.

- Be a charitable listener, presuming the best of the other. In the words of St. Ignatius, “It should be presupposed that every good Christian ought to be more eager to put a good interpretation on a neighbor’s statement than to condemn it” (*Spiritual Exercises*, 22).
- Speak deliberately, lowering pitch and tone. If you are conversing with someone with hearing impairment or cognition issues, this will be especially helpful. It also sets a calm, thoughtful pace to the session.
- Ask building and clarification questions such as, “That’s so interesting, could you tell me more about that experience?”

- Ask relational questions to encourage connections, especially facilitating seeing situations and ideas in a Christian context. For example, “How do you see Christ’s presence in what you’re going through right now?”
- If conversation wanders too off topic or moves into gossip, criticism, negativity, etc., gently direct it back to spiritual and/or virtuous topics.
- Avoid assuming how a person feels by saying, “You must feel...” because the person may not, in fact, feel that way. For example, you may initially think that someone feels sad because their daughter cannot visit often when they are actually relieved and grateful because their daughter has a new job after a long period of unemployment.
- Listen so as to understand rather than to impress, opine, or compete with a reply.
- Avoid prying into the person’s personal life. The other person may volunteer information about their health, living situation, family, etc., but be careful not to ask unnecessarily probing or intrusive questions. Ask questions out of sincere interest, not to satisfy your personal curiosity.
- Keep the focus on the other person. It is fine to share general information about yourself but resist sharing too much detail, especially about your problems, opinions, etc.
- Always maintain the confidentiality of what the person is sharing with you.

- Be joyful! Again, in the words of Pope Francis, “Only if our witness is joyful will we attract men and women to Christ...Christian joy is usually accompanied by a sense of humor” (*Gaudete et Exsultate*, no.126). Even if the person on the other end of the call cannot see you, they can sense the smile on your face and share in laughter of a funny story, clever observation, and hopeful outlook.

ADDRESSING CONCERNS

Remember the purpose of a spiritual call companion is to journey alongside a person who is homebound, not to solve their problems. Often there are professionals or family members better equipped and more appropriately situated than you to handle the problems.

If serious issues related to emotional, physical, or financial well-being arise, bring these areas of concern to the pastor or ministry coordinator for proper referral. Similarly, if serious spiritual issues arise such as concern over grave sin, bioethics, medical decision making, request for the Anointing of the Sick, and the like arise, contact your pastor.

The Office of Formation & Discipleship is here to help continuously guide leaders in the process. Please contact:

Patrick Metts, LPC - Associate Director of Family Life & Pastoral Care

404-920-7643 pmetts@archatl.com

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Forming Eucharistic Visitors: Initial & Ongoing Formation for Eucharistic Ministers to the Sick & Homebound, The Pastoral Center, 2019

Webinar “Church on Call – Accompanying Parishioners Through Phone Calls During Times of Separation,” Catholic Apostolate Center and Archdiocese of Washington. April 15, 2020. Available directly here:

<https://www.catholicapostolatecenter.org/covid-19.html>.

<https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/7-tips-for-communicating-well-from-st-ignatius/>

PARISH PHONE CALL SCRIPT



Contacting parishioners to connect them with practical and spiritual resources is an important way to accompany parishioners when you cannot meet in person. Below is a script to guide you and your team through these important conversations.

PARISH ASSISTANCE CALL SCRIPT



I. Introduce yourself

"Hi, my name is _____. I'm a parishioner at _____ Parish. May I speak to (name of contact)?"

- ▶ **Contact not available:** "Is there a better time for me to call back?"

**Write down call-back day & time. Try again at that time.*

- ▶ **No Answer, Leave Voicemail:**

"Hi, my name is _____. I'm a parishioner at _____ Parish. Father _____ wants our faith community to stay connected to each other during this difficult time, so we're calling all our registered parishioners to see how they are doing and if there is anything you may need. Please feel free to call me back at (____) ____ - _____."

- ▶ **Contact (or another adult) is available:**

"Father _____ wants our faith community to remain connected to each other during this difficult time, so we're calling all our registered parishioners to see how you are doing and if there is anything you may need."

2. Ask how the parish might be able to support them

"How are you doing? Is there anything our faith community can do to support you at this time? (listen to their response) ... These are some of the services we can offer or connect you to:"

**List the services your parish can offer or connect parishioners to.*

"If there is something else you need we can do our best to connect you with the appropriate services."

- ▶ **Yes, there is something I need.**

**Note their need or request with as much detail as possible.*

- ▶ **No, there is nothing I need. *Move to the next question.**

3. Ask about others in need

"Is there anyone you know, even outside the community, who is in need at this time?"

- ▶ **Yes** "Is it ok for us to contact them?"

- ▶ **Yes** "May I take down their phone number so we can reach out to them?"

- ▶ **No** "May I leave the parish contact information with you to pass along to them?"

- ▶ **No, there is nothing I need at this time.** "Is it ok if I call back in a couple of weeks?"

**Write down their name, the date they would like a call back, and the phone number to call back.*

4. End the Conversation

"We also wanted to share a reminder that public Masses have been suspended for now, but the parish website and social media have details about the continued spiritual resources we are offering including:" **List Parishes spiritual resources.*

"Would you like to be added to our email list (flocknote, etc.) so you get updated information and announcements from our parish?"

- ▶ **Yes** "May I confirm that your email address and phone number are accurate?"

- ▶ **No** "No problem!"

5. Offer prayer

“Before I go, do you have any specific prayer intentions we can add to our parish prayer list, or is there a friend or loved one that we can be praying for?”

**Note their prayer intention and ask,*



“Can I say a quick prayer with you right before we hang up?”

- ▶ **Yes** **Offer the prayer below*
- ▶ **No** “Okay. Thank you for talking with me today. Please feel free to contact the parish should you need anything and know that I’ll be praying for you today. Have a blessed day.”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Lord, thank you for our parish community and the gift of this conversation. We know that you are with us in this challenging time and that you know all of our needs. In a special way, I would like to pray for (parishioner’s name) and all their loved ones and intentions [especially, (name their intention)]. Lord, we praise you for your goodness and mercy. Help us to always remember that you are with us in times of joy and sadness. Fill us with your comfort and peace. We ask this through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Thank you for speaking with me today. Please know of our continued prayers for you. Have a blessed day.

THINGS TO CONSIDER



Archdiocese of
Washington

CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING BEFORE YOUR CALLS

1. Gather a list of parishioners and phone numbers. Make a note of which parishioners are elderly and/or live alone.
2. Recruit staff and volunteers to make phone calls.
3. Establish a system for collecting call notes and who will follow up if needed (e.g. choose one email for individual call notes to be sent to, set up an online form or sheet, etc.)
4. Distribute the call list to volunteers. Mark the priority calls at the top of each list. Include the method for volunteers to submit their call notes.
5. What practical resources is your parish able to offer? Examples:
 - a. Information about local food distribution
 - b. Grocery delivery/medication pick-up
 - c. Access to infant items or other necessities in short supply
 - d. Information regarding short term financial assistance or how to apply for unemployment benefits (phone number of appropriate local agency)
6. What spiritual resources is your parish able to offer?
 - a. Live streamed prayer
 - b. Parking lot Confession or Adoration. Opportunity to set up a phone call to talk with a priest or deacon.
 - c. Weekly prayer partner calls
 - d. Online formation resources
7. List the practical and spiritual resources your parish offers or can connect people to, and share with your callers.
8. Share answers to frequently asked questions (at right) with your callers.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

“When will public Masses resume?”

Unfortunately, we do not know. I know the Archdiocese is relying on the most up-to-date information from the federal and state agencies to protect parishioners and provide for their spiritual needs. As soon as we have an update, our parish will share that information with parishioners via _____.

“What do I do if I know someone who is sick and in need of the Sacraments?”

While many people are nervous right now, the Sacrament of the Sick is reserved for those who are in dire need. Anyone who has an emergency need for the Sacrament of the Sick should contact _____ to get in touch with Father.

(Rumor or fear) “I heard a particular parishioner or clergy person was sick. Is that true?”

People may be scared and want to discuss various rumors that they have heard. While still listening with compassion, please do not engage in sharing rumors, or share personal information about other parishioners.

Other questions

If you get a question and do not know the answer, please do not try to answer the question. Simply tell the person that you will get the answer and someone will get back to them. Note their question with as much detail as possible and submit it with other follow-up notes.