

**The
Circle Way
for
Communities
of Faith**

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“Tune your ears to the world of wisdom;
set your heart on a life of understanding.”

Proverbs 2:2

How I met The Circle Way

In 2009, as I was accepting a position to work with 32 congregations as a conference minister, I was given a copy of Christina Baldwin's book, [*Calling the Circle, The First and Future Culture*](#). The book came to me in a rather mysterious way, arriving in my mailbox without me ever having seen or heard of it before. As I devoured every word and concept for creating safe, open conversations with clusters of people, I quickly realized that this was a book I needed to pay attention to!

The concept of circle conversations inspired me to think how valuable this process could be in faith communities. As our churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples experience the societal shifts of our times, we, too, are required to rethink how we are being called to be people of faith in new and perhaps unfamiliar ways. I already knew that faith leaders were struggling to help their communities make these changes while maintaining a cohesive balance of needs, wants, fears, and excitement. From my own experience, I knew that part of the challenge was making sure that everyone feels heard, acknowledged, and respected. What are their concerns? What excites them? What do they want to hold on to, what are they willing to release, and why?

Baldwin's concept of circle communications addressed these concerns, so in 2010, I traveled to Whidbey Island, Washington, to take a four-day training in what is now called The Circle Way (based on Baldwin and co-author Ann Linnea's most recent book, [*The Circle Way: A Leader in Every Chair*](#)). I found myself in an international group of clergy, consultants, educators, community activists, and business leaders, all seeking to take leadership in our professional spheres by offering a different way of meeting and being together.

The Circle Way allows conversations to be experienced at a transformational level: people discover that, through speaking and listening carefully, with a shared purpose or question in the center, we often feel companioned by wisdom and clarity. In this way, circle invites us into deep, meaningful dialogues about what really matters. Imagine board and congregational or faith-based gatherings where decision-making is based on a profound theological discussion of the community's call – where everyone is actively involved in learning, teaching, and discerning together.

I've used circle practice for more than seven years now, and it has proven to be an invaluable tool for working with boards, congregations, retreat participants, and larger courts. Its ongoing use has enabled congregations to be more effective in their daily work and helped them respond to the big questions of mission, vision, and the future.

What is The Circle Way?

The Circle Way is a model of communication rooted in ancient practice and molded by Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea into a twenty-first century social architecture for healthy, respectful, and creative conversations. Foundational to The Circle Way is an understanding that everyone has something to offer the group, and that there is "a leader in every chair." From this perspective, the structure of circle is used to create a safe place for people to share openly and for

creative energy to flow freely.

Baldwin and Linnea have diagrammed this structure in what they call The Components Wheel. This is a representation of the structure needed to call a healthy, strong circle into being and to set loose the interactions within that structure that will help achieve a positive outcome.

The language to explain these components can shift according to *who* is in the circle, *what* its intention is, and *where* it is being practiced. What matters is the structural strength; what is fluid is how the structure is referenced. My experience is largely church-based, and the following stories are teaching tales about using circle in congregations. I have shifted some of the language from the book, *The Circle Way*, which is aimed at a broad general audience to make it more contextual in a faith-based setting. As you use circle, you, too, will find your own ways of speaking it to the folks around you.

The Components of Circle



The components of circle

The outer rim of this diagram consists of three preparatory activities that stabilize the calling of the circle.

Hosting

Every circle has a host, a person who calls the circle and sets the intention. The host arranges for the space and prepares it for the gathering. Although the Circle Way is about much more than the configuration of the seating, wherever possible, chairs should be placed in a circle, eliminating boardroom tables or rows of pews. This may take some creative thinking, but will be of great benefit to the process. If you don't have movable seating in the sanctuary, consider

moving congregational meetings to the gathering hall or gymnasium. The host may recruit others to assist with these tasks.

Invitation

Why is this circle being called? Who should be invited? What do you hope to accomplish?

These are the questions you'll want to ask when considering whether and when to call a circle. You'll want to answer them in the invitation and reiterate them when the circle convenes. This will help people understand the importance of the gathering as well the importance of their presence and participation. With clear invitation, people come prepared to participate, feel acknowledged and welcomed, and are ready to work, play, speak, and listen.

Personal preparation

The Circle Way process encourages people to speak from their heart and invokes an energy within the circle that supports both story and creative thinking. For this reason, personal preparation through prayer, meditation – and an invocation to openness for the process and its results – is an important step for the host to take. Don't rush into a circle gathering. Take time to prepare your heart and mind for the worshipful experience that circle offers.

The outer rim of the Components Wheel helps hold both the participants and the process of The Circle Way, which are diagrammed above. Within this outer rim, having a visible center (even on the middle of a table) provides a shared focal point whose role will become obvious and much respected.

Center

Intention and energy are held in the center of the circle. As you are preparing the space for a circle gathering, take care to set the center in an appropriate way. A cloth and items that represent your faith and/or conversation topic are appropriate. A candle may also be placed in the center to remind us, as people of faith, that the Holy is at the center of our gathering and shines within, around, and through us.

Between the outer rim and the center are the components of structure and activities that animate that structure. For simplicity's sake, I'll start at the top and move clockwise around the wheel.

Start point

When the participants have arrived, and are seated, the host or another pre-selected person may welcome them, remind them of the intention of the gathering, and move into silence, prayer or some other appropriate gesture that helps to create an intentional time of centering and preparation for the conversation to follow.

If this is the first time you are using The Circle Way, take time to explain it, and invite any

questions people may have. Be sure to talk about the importance of the center, how it holds the group's energy, intention, and helps sustain the container for the conversation that is about to happen.

One approach I find helpful in communities of faith is to explain the use of the center and our careful listening in the following way:

At the center is the Light, the Holy. In our sharing, we're invited to speak "to the center," meaning this is not a conversation of the whole, but an opportunity to speak your own truth. It strikes me then, that if we are speaking to the center, and the center is the Holy, we are, in fact, speaking to the Holy – something we usually call prayer. This means that those who are gathered around the circle listening are being invited in as witnesses to the prayer. We would never think to correct someone's prayer, tell them how to do it better or what they're doing wrong. And so, it is with circle.

Even when using circle to explore, discern, and plan with your faith community, this approach helps to remind people that every gathered soul is a leader and has something of value to offer the whole.

For those who are accustomed to separating a sense of the sacred from the traditional business approach to meetings, circle process may feel uncomfortable. Encourage everyone to trust the process and even be a little playful with it. Explain that if there is discomfort with what is happening, this should be brought to the attention of the host, through the guardian's pause bell (the role of the guardian is explained more fully below), so it can be addressed rather than allowing it to sidetrack the intention of the gathering. It might also be helpful for participants who are task- and solution-driven to plan for time just before check-out for the completion of a "Moving Forward Chart" that includes the following columns: *Action, By whom, Resources Required, Timeline, and Accountable to whom*. (See Appendix 2)

Agreements

To help create a safe, respectful container, it is essential that circle agreements be made with the group. Some faith communities may already have a behavioral covenant in place that can be read and agreed to. However, nothing quite so extensive is necessary for most circles. Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea suggest the following generic agreements, with an open invitation for additions and adaptations.

1. *Personal material shared in the circle is confidential.*
It is worth spending time considering the applicable parameters of confidentiality to ensure that all participants share a definition of what is meant and expected of them.
2. *We listen to each other with curiosity and compassion, withholding judgment.*
Curiosity enables people to listen and speak without having to be in total agreement: curiosity invites discernment rather than judgment.
3. *We ask for what we need and offer what we can.*
This agreement is a form of self-correction in direction. Generally, if a request fits the task and orientation of the group, someone in the circle will volunteer to help carry it forward. If a request doesn't fit task and orientation, no one is likely to volunteer.

4. *From time to time, we pause to re-gather our thoughts or focus.*

To create these pauses, one member of the circle volunteers to serve as the guardian, who employs a bell or other non-verbal audible signal to introduce a moment of silence into whatever is taking place.

Another way to present these in the faith community is as **HOLY** agreements:

Hold stories in confidence.

Open to the needs of others and yourself.

Listen with compassion and curiosity.

Yield to moments of silence.

I carry small index cards with the HOLY agreements on them and place them on each chair as well as in the center, so people can have them on hand to remind themselves of this aspect of the process. You can find free downloadable HOLY agreement cards in the Resources area of the Circle Way website: www.thecircleway.net

Check-in

Each circle gathering begins with a check-in. This pattern provides an opportunity for people to become aware of *who* is showing up and *how* they are showing up. A simple check-in question might be, “What are you setting aside to be here today?” Each person in the circle has an opportunity to respond, but may pass if desired. People who pass are often given a second opportunity to speak after listening, though they are not required to speak. In the initial invitation, the host may ask participants to bring an object for the center that fits with the theme or is representative of who/where they are in life right now. This object is placed in the center of the circle during check-in along, with an explanation of the object choice.

Intention

Intention is the organizing principle of the circle conversation: the *why* we are coming together. In the stories that follow, the role of intention becomes clear. When placed symbolically or literally in the center, intention helps the host and guardian manage the flow of the meeting and call people back to the original purpose for which the circle was called.

Three principles of circle

An important aspect of The Circle Way is the opportunity for equal participation within the circle. The following three principles help to clarify how this is lived out.

Rotating leadership

Each person in the circle is a leader in his or her own right. You’ve invited participants into the conversation because they have a perspective, experience, and wisdom that you value.

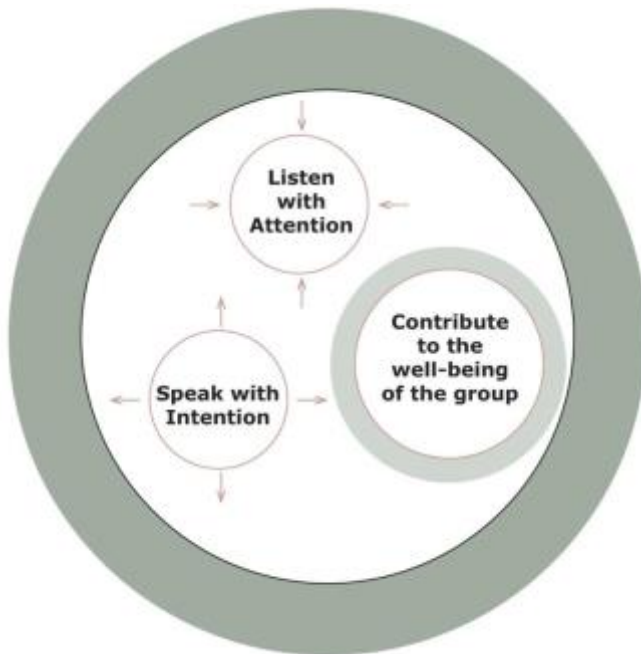
Author Janet W. Carey says, “We have all the gifts we need and we need all the gifts we have.”¹ That is a good way to describe the value of rotating leadership, which means that it isn’t necessary for the same person to consistently act as the host or the guardian for ongoing circles. These are responsibilities that can be shared among the group as people become comfortable with the process.

Sharing responsibility

The more people learn to be attentive to the needs of the process, the more productive the circle will be. Rather than waiting for a “key” person – chair/clergy/elder – to set the agenda or handle the group process, people can collectively tend to the needs and intention of the group.

Reliance on wholeness

As individuals, we work for a common good. We trust that the wisdom and insights we are seeking reside within those people gathered in the circle. From varied stories and ideas come a new way of thinking or seeing; an unexpected epiphany or “aha” that comes only when relying on the whole.



Three practices

Conversation of any kind, from casual socializing to structured dialogue, requires skill. The following three practices strengthen our verbal interaction within circle and beyond.

¹ *Who Is Our Church?: Imagining Congregational Identity* by Janet R. Cawley, published in 2006 by Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Attentive listening

Listening with our ears, eyes, and hearts requires setting aside our own thoughts, ideas and ways of responding, so we can be attentive to the person who is speaking. If a response slips through your mind, and it is truly appropriate and valuable, it will return to you when it is your turn to speak. By listening attentively to each person, you may find that new and unexpected concepts or stories arise for you that turn out to be essential for the sharing you need to offer.

Intentional speaking

Before speaking, ask yourself, “Is what I am about to say relevant, appropriate, respectful, and from the heart?” Intentional speaking allows what needs to be said to be spoken without the need for either total agreement or blame and shame. What is spoken should be for the enhancement of the conversation and intention of the circle.

Attending to the wellbeing of the group

What we say and how we say it can impact the circle positively or negatively. In all our words and actions, it’s important to be respectful and attentive to the agreed-upon intention of the group.

Questions to ask yourself include:

- What is my motivation or hope for sharing this?
- What is my body telling me about tension or excitement?
- How do I offer my contribution in a way that will benefit what we’re doing?
- How do I need to consider what I say, before I say it, and still speak my “truth?”²

Guardian

The practice of attending to the wellbeing of the whole allows participants to serve as “guardians” of their own contributions to the circle. The role of guardian of the circle is assigned to one person who then applies this practice to the group process, timing, flow, and energy. The guardian is attentive to such things as:

- Do we need time and space to digest what has just been said? Perhaps it was tender, profound, or thought-provoking?
- Is the conversation moving too quickly?
- Has the group wandered off topic?
- Is there a new tension in the room?
- Are people being disrespectful or not abiding by the agreements?

² [*The Circle Way: A Leader in Every Chair*](#) by Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea, published in 2010 by Berrett-Koehler Publishers, page 28

- Are people becoming restless and in need of a break?

The guardian has at his or her disposal a bell/shaker/singing bowl or other gentle noise-maker that calls the group to pause in the midst of the process or conversation. The guardian rings the bell to invite the community to stop, take a breath, re-focus on self or center, and wait for a second ring – after which the guardian explains the motivation for the pause. For example:

- “I rang the bell, so we could let those last comments settle into our listening.”
- “I’m noticing a shift in content and wonder if we’re finished talking about X and ready to move on ... shall we honor this shift? Anything incomplete?”
- “We are now at the halfway point in our time, and I invite us to hold brevity as we continue. And remember, we will want to save 10 minutes or so for checking out.”

The guardian is not the only one who can decide to ring the bell. Anyone in the circle who senses the need for a pause can ask the guardian to ring it, and after the pause and second ring or sound, this person will explain why he or she asked for the pause.

The guardian holds the process and progress of the meeting in collaboration with the host. Host and guardian often sit across the circle from each other to assist in “holding the space,” and to balance the points of visible leadership.

Check-out

At the end of the circle process, a check-out round enables people to offer any final thoughts or reflections on the time spent together. The host might ask for a word or phrase that participants will be carrying with them. A few sample check-out questions include:

- What did you learn today? Name an insight...
- What most inspired you?
- Any prayers or gratitude you want to offer to our center?

As with the check-in, each person is given an opportunity to respond, but may pass if desired. If people have placed any personal objects into the center, they may retrieve them with a few words about what the gathering has meant to them.

A bell, bit of silence, or some other ritual of completion occurs, and then people shift into social space.

That completes the Components Wheel. In addition, there are a few other elements that will help you apply circle.

Harvesting

If multiple smaller circles are activated within the context of a large group, it is important to “harvest” the wisdom of each by having the smaller circles share with the whole group. Rather than hearing the details of every conversation, harvesting means sharing key ideas, concepts, and questions. The harvest may be gathered orally, written on a board, or gathered on sheets of paper.

You can structure responses with a suggestion such as “List three key points or questions that arose in your small group that you want to share with everyone.”

Scribe

The scribe is the third role of leadership in circle process. There may be times when it's important to capture the essence of comments in a circle conversation while it is happening. In such cases, a scribe may volunteer to record an overview. This is not taking precise minutes, but an act of listening for important insights for further reflection or action. If precise minute-taking is required, it may be best to have someone outside the conversation take on this role, as it can be challenging to stay engaged with the process when taking detailed minutes.

Understanding the components of circle gives us the ability to create various forms of circles, depending on the intention of their use. A circle or council may be called for brainstorming, decision-making, or community-building. In each case, there may be slight shifts in the process.

Forms of circle

The talking piece and talking-piece circle

A talking piece ensures that all voices have an opportunity to be heard. The piece may be an object from nature, something sacred to the community, or a small item that relates to the topic being discussed. The talking piece is passed around the circle. The person holding the talking piece is the only one who speaks, while others listen attentively. It's important to note that the talking piece is an *invitation* to share, not a requirement. Once the talking piece has gone around the circle, anyone who did not speak is offered another opportunity to share before moving on to the next piece of work, question, or topic. You may also want to ask if anyone thought of something else to share before moving on.

The use of a talking piece slows down the interaction, allowing people to pause and think while speaking. This prevents others from monopolizing the conversation and organizes it so that people know when their turn is coming.

Conversation circle

While a talking piece is very helpful to make sure all voices are heard, there are times when energy increases and ideas and possibilities bubble. When using a talking piece impedes this creative process, set it aside. Let the verbal energy flow. But be aware that for some participants, the conversation may begin to move too quickly, at which time the talking piece can be reinstated to allow for integration of the creative flow to settle in. You may want to set your usual talking piece aside for a tossable object, such as a bean bag, which can move in any direction -- even across the circle -- allowing conversation to continue respectfully, but not necessarily in a circular pattern. Adding a round of sharing using the talking piece at the end of free-flowing, energetic sessions provides an opportunity for those who have not shared to offer

their own insights.

Story circle

Story circle provides an opportunity for people to share and have their own personal stories witnessed. Stories create a space for caring and compassion while allowing participants to learn more about each other. Story circles are a wonderful tool for helping people understand where differences are rooted, and to bring a new level of respect among group members.

In the midst of changing times in our faith communities, story circles can help us gain perspective on what is important and what can be released. Rather than making changes and dealing with the fallout from those who are unhappy, consider taking time to gather in circle and invite stories that relate to the changes being considered. Perhaps you can suggest a story, such as, “Describe a time when worship has been most meaningful for you.” Listen deeply to the stories as they reveal insights into why the music, the liturgy, the fellowship, or some other aspect of worship is so close to the heart of particular individuals. Stories are the root of many opinions and festering divisions; they can also be the source of healing, new openness, and creative leaps forward. After stories, have been shared, other conversations can happen that allow shifts in perspective to take place. Don’t rush the process. It’s important that members of your faith community feel they’ve been heard, and their stories honored. If each person has been heard and has heard others, there will be a better understanding of why the decision is being made.

In hosting a story circle, there are a few things to consider.

- How well do the people know each other, and how comfortable are they with each other?
- What are you trying to achieve with the story circle? (Community-building, understanding perspectives, team-building, etc.) The stories people share should relate to the intention of the circle.
- What question will invite appropriate stories without making people feel they have to share more than they want to?
- How many people are being invited and how much time do you have? On average, without placing time restrictions, you can expect five minutes per person. With this in mind, is there a need to put a time restriction on sharing? If so, let people know how much time they have. For example, “In three minutes, please share...” (this is where the guardian’s role as time-keeper becomes important).
- It can be helpful to include the question you have chosen in the invitation to the story circle. This enables introverts and those unfamiliar with circle to prepare in advance. It also provides a focus for those who need help narrowing the scope of their story.

It’s not uncommon, in story circles, for emotions to arise both in the speaker and the listeners. It’s helpful, therefore, for both the guardian and host to work closely at holding the energy of the circle. It can be helpful, even before the circle begins, to explain to the group that the guardian will ring the bell for a pause at certain points (quarterly or half-way through the round), to allow the stories to settle in and to hold space for those who are sharing. It may also be appropriate for the bell to be rung at other points as the guardian, host, or other participants deem

necessary (i.e., the story is profoundly moving to some or all of the group; something thought-provoking has been said in the midst of the story, etc.).

The type of circle needed will be determined by the intention of the circle. Why is it being called? Who is participating? What do you hope to accomplish with it?

Following are some stories of using circle in faith settings. In some cases, one particular style of circle was used. In others, the circle format shifted throughout the session.

Stories of circle in faith communities

Boards/councils

Elections were over, resulting in a new congregational board. Some were long-time church members, others were new, both to the board and to the congregation. In planning a retreat, the board determined that it needed to do some visioning for the future. Past attempts at such gatherings gleaned many ideas, but few active results. Someone commented that it would also be good to have some time to get to know each other a bit at the retreat.

In preparation for the retreat, participants were asked to bring something that represented who they were at that time in their lives, and to be prepared to share a brief story about it with the group.

The circle began with the lighting of the center candle and a meditation on presence, recognizing the flow of energy in the room and allowing this energy to hold the people, individually, as well as the circle as a whole. This meditation was followed by an explanation of the circle process. The check-in used the format of a story circle, with participants placing the items they brought into the center and sharing a brief story of explanation. For those who forgot to bring an item, a basket of random items was available for them to choose from, if they desired. Sharing ranged from simple to profound, from heady to deeply spiritual. All of it was great! However, it was apparent that some people were wondering why so much time was being spent on this opening, knowing all the work that was waiting to be accomplished that day.

The working retreat continued through the afternoon, using both talking-piece and conversation circles to discuss mission and vision statements, roles of the board and its members, and other key issues the board would need to address in the coming year.

At the end of the day, with an action plan in hand, the board was pleased with the process and the work accomplished. In the check-out round, several members noted how productive the day was, saying, "We could never have gotten to where we did if we hadn't started with that check-in."

Mission and vision planning

"The place God calls you to is the place
where your deep gladness and
the world's deep hunger meet."

Frederick Buechner

For seven years, a congregation discussed, planned, and attempted to discern what to do with

its aging building. The most recent attempt at action resulted in a split vote, with a single ballot tipping the scales toward virtual inaction – doing the simplest, cheapest renovation possible. With such a slim margin, the congregation was hesitant to move in any direction. In addition, the newly called minister recognized that the congregation stepped into the building issues without taking time to consider what its mission and vision were. She called a congregational meeting to discuss how best to move forward.

It was the first time that the congregation would meet using The Circle Way. The chairs in the room were arranged in circles of eight, each having its own center with a candle and chime. As participants arrived, they were invited to sit down, filling each circle before beginning another one. The day opened with prayer, an explanation of the circle process, and a reaffirmation of the intention of the gathering, as specified in the invitation that had been extended. Participants were asked to choose a guardian and scribe for their circle and a talking-piece round began. Each circle was invited to reflect on the Buechner quote above and asked to name the “deep gladness” of the congregation – the gifts and skills, both individually and corporate, that they witnessed.

After several minutes of exuberant exploration, the scribes from each circle shared the harvest.

The process was repeated as they reflected on what they saw as the “deep hungers” or needs of the neighborhood, city, and world.

As a third round of exploration, a conversation circle convened to explore where intersections arose between the “deep gladness” and “deep hungers” (for example, a need for nutritious meals intersecting with a joy for cooking and passion for hospitality.) This was followed by a discussion of the role they saw themselves playing and the type of building projects that might be necessary to accomplish these goals.

By the end of the day, and after many impassioned conversations, the congregation crystallized a mission and vision of being a faithful presence in the community, serving not only as a spiritual presence, but also as a support system to their low-income neighbors, through both their thrift store and a weekly soup program.

They determined that the kitchen was a key outreach ministry that was currently being under-used. They also recognized that the location of the building made it difficult to find, so there was a need for them to work on being more visible to the community in other ways.

They were excited and passionate about what they accomplished and what they recognized about themselves through these circle conversations. In the weeks to come, after prayerfully speaking their intentions, they were approached by four organizations requesting to use their kitchen facilities to assist people in their neighborhood. The decision-making was simple, as the requests aligned perfectly with the congregation they now understood themselves to be and where they felt God was calling them.

The congregation was becoming known throughout the city for their work with food services, and through the generosity of the organizations who used their space (they referred to them as “partners”) were able to complete a number of upgrades to their building, including kitchen and sanctuary updates.

Recently, the congregation decided to sell its building to its largest partner, a nonprofit, and then lease back sanctuary and office space. In this arrangement, the ministries of the congregation remained intact, the congregation had some essential funding in the bank, and it was released from the responsibilities of building upkeep and maintenance. The power of circle

conversation brought new life to this congregation and its neighborhood.

Congregational conversations

A small, rural congregation was made up of a devoted and determined group of elderly women. Some grew up in this church, while others adopted it as their own when they moved into the hamlet. Unfortunately, their numbers were shrinking drastically, and it was only the church-run thrift store that was keeping them afloat financially. To the outsider, it was apparent that this congregation needed to close. It was becoming obvious that the property had shifted, both figuratively and literally, from being a church with a thrift store to being a thrift store with a church. However, when the topic of possible closure was broached, the members (all nine of them) were adamant that they could continue on “for at least another five years,” despite the lack of participants, finances, and energy.

At the end of the first year, with no improvements in sight, they were encouraged to think about the legacy they would leave and how they wanted to end their ministry in this small community. Their response was to laugh and insist “we can still go another five years!”

A few weeks later, in a retreat setting, the congregation came together with its larger, sister congregation from the neighboring community. For more than 50 years, the two congregations shared a minister, with the larger congregation carrying most of the financial burden. On this day, they came together to discuss future plans and the calling of a new minister. It was in this setting, using a talking-piece circle and story circle, that each person had the opportunity to do some deep reflection and sharing. It was here, in circle, with the energy of the Holy and the patience, respect, and caring of the whole, that the members of this small congregation determined, on their own, that it was time to close. The decision was an emotional one and each congregant was given an opportunity to name her joys, concerns, and reasons for her personal decision. The vote was unanimous. The congregation would close with both grief and gladness, recognizing that it had done fine ministry and that it was OK to now release it back into God’s hands.

Small group reflections

A group of eight gathered for the first time. Some knew each other, others did not. Their common goal was to create a series of meaningful events that would touch people deeply. The Circle was created and each person checked in using the talking piece, responding to the question “How is your weather today?” The conversation that followed attempted to flush out what they wanted for the event they were planning. Several people agreed they wanted something that would feed and inspire participants. The invitation was made to move into story council and “Share a story about a time that you felt nourished and inspired”. The responses led to an effective and efficient determination of the varied aspects that should be incorporated into the events and the planning process moved forward quickly.

At the end of this meeting the participants noted how profound a discussion it had turned out to be and that it was the first time they had experienced such deep sharing from a group.

Congregational conflict

A congregation experienced considerable conflict, both between congregants and the minister and between different factions within the congregation. The current minister was working to guide them through healthy conflict-resolution and assist them with a vision for their future. After a few months both the minister and congregation believed that reconciliation and healing had begun.

At a congregational committee meeting, a recommendation was approved to remove an old set of hymnals from the pews. It was one of four different hymnals sets currently vying for space in the hymnal rack. These hymnals dated back to the 1940's and were seldom used. The proposal was seen as a healthy step forward, and the congregational board approved of the recommendation.

Before the congregation could be informed of the decision, a member of the congregational committee who was involved in the decision-making process acted on the decision and removed the hymnals. (It's important to note that this conflict is a minor symptom of the power struggle that was well ensconced in that congregation.) Conflict quickly developed between members of the congregation who did not support the removal of the hymnals and those who did, and the minister became the scapegoat. After acknowledging the frustration of both sides and apologizing for the fact that the congregation hadn't been duly informed, the minister called a congregational meeting to discuss the options regarding the removal of the hymnals.

Using a talking-piece circle, the intention was set to hear all concerns and attempt to resolve the matter with a win-win solution. One thing all the members could agree on was that they were skeptical such a solution could be found! Circle agreements were set, and each person in attendance agreed to abide by them. In the first round with the talking piece, participants were asked to explain why they, as individuals, were upset about the decision.

In the second round, they were asked what it meant to them – personally and spiritually to have those hymnals available.

In the third round, they were asked what they thought might be a solution that everyone could agree on. This final round required going around the circle twice, so everyone had an opportunity to make additional suggestions.

This congregation was accustomed to having to fight for what it wanted, whether between themselves or with their leaders. For them, there was no such thing as a “win-win” solution. Imagine their surprise when the person who had voiced the most opposition to the original decision came up with the solution that everyone could agree on! It took patience and persistence, but more importantly, it took one of the participants in the circle to find the solution and shift the way everyone thought about conflict and its resolution.

Of course, this was not a miracle solution to congregational conflict, and the congregation will continue to have its power struggles, but using circle has given congregants insight into how disagreements might be solved, while respecting everyone's voice and listening carefully to the wisdom in the circle.

Important note: There are varied levels of conflict, and care must be taken to tend to the wellbeing of all. If you don't feel capable of handling the level of conflict in a group, seek out assistance from your governing body or other trained professionals. There are trained circle consultants who can assist you in this as well. It can be hard work to hold the energy of a highly

conflicted group, so having the help of people with that experience and skill set can be important. For a list of facilitators, visit: www.thecircleway.net

Wider gatherings of the faith community During a session of a regional court (an official gathering of the larger church), youth delegates brought forward a proposal that only ethically raised meat be served at meals during these gatherings. They took time to go over their research, showed a video that supported their perspective, and discussed their reasons for making the proposal.

Using first a talking-piece circle, and then smaller conversation circles, the group was asked to discuss the issue, posing the question: *What would the benefits and drawbacks of taking this action be?*

The circle participants had an opportunity to share, reflect, and discern together. Taking turns, each circle then harvested the most important points, sharing them with the full gathering. Questions were responded to and the decision-making body voted (in this case unanimously) to support the proposal.

The benefits of The Circle Way

The benefits of using The Circle Way in larger faith-based settings include the following:

- Circle gives everyone an opportunity to speak and be heard
- It prevents the challenge of only two or three people repeatedly speaking to the gathered community, while other voices remain silent.
- To come to a group understanding, people speak openly, honestly, and with a depth that is usually unseen in large group settings.

Introducing circle to your faith community

There is no right or wrong way to introduce circle into the life of your faith community. In fact, some would say “just do it!” But here are a couple of approaches you might find helpful when considering how to embed circle into your system.

Start small

Begin with the leaders of your faith community, the board, council, or leadership team. As these people learn the process, have them extend it to the committees or other small groups to which they belong. Once circle is being used by the committees, moving it into congregational gatherings will be simpler, as a number of people will have experience with it and be able to assist and tend to the initial leadership roles.

Start simply

Perhaps this feels like the perfect process for a congregational conversation. You may find it helpful to have two or three people read through this booklet to become familiar with The Circle

Way process and together, you can plan your day and support the rest of the congregation with their involvement. Let the participants “play” with the process a bit, if this feels comfortable. A light-hearted check-in round is always a good opportunity for people to get used to the model without feeling intimidated by it.

Simply start

One of the most basic needs of human beings is to understand and be understood. To accomplish this, it’s necessary to provide safe, respectful communities of sharing. Talking-piece circles, conversation circles, and story circles provide environments that are conducive to deep, profound sharing. In circle, people share both the familiar and the unexpected. Relationships develop, and bonds form from the sharing that has taken place. Indeed, there is a spiritual energy that develops in circle and holds its participants in a container of grace. The Circle Way has been very successful in bringing diverse people together, allowing them to discover similarities and differences that enrich relationships and empower action.

Sometimes it can feel a little uncomfortable proposing a new process, but if you are reading this, and it resonates with you, the Holy might be inviting you into a new way of gathering. Step out boldly and dare to try! You might be surprised at the results!

Frequently asked questions

How many people do you need for a circle?

A circle can consist of as few as two people or as many as you want. Size will impact the form and process.

How do I hold circle with a large group of people?

Large groups can be divided into a number of smaller circles. In this case, each circle would have the three points of leadership (host, guardian, and scribe). Additional time is needed to harvest key ideas from each circle into the large group at appropriate times throughout the gathering.

What constitutes a “good question?”

An important aspect of circle is knowing what questions will allow people to respond in helpful ways. Good questions:

- are relevant to the intention of the circle
- are short and simple
- require more than a “yes” or “no” answer

- invite reflection and open-hearted responses
- encourage people to think for themselves
- are sequential to the process and what is being shared

What if I decide to try it and someone objects?

Using circle is a unique form of meeting. Some people will be skeptical; some will be nervous. Don't be afraid to name it as different and acknowledge up front that some may feel uncomfortable with it. Then ask them to take a chance and see it as an experiment. Encourage them to let the circle know if and when they are struggling. (This is part of "Ask for what you need.") Take time to talk through it with them, either within the circle, if that's appropriate, or during a break, outside the circle. Don't be surprised if some of your most adamant opponents become the biggest advocates for circle!

Is there someplace I can get more training in The Circle Way?

Yes! You can view upcoming learning opportunities on the website of The Circle Way (www.thecircleway.net). Or add your name to the email list on the [Subscribe](#) page of the website to be notified of upcoming trainings.

Origins of The Circle Way

Circle process is often referred to as the foundational pattern supporting emerging forms of dialogue. In our need to remember and reattach to this quality of listening and speaking and collaborative action, several modern lineages of circle practice are being carried at this time, as well as the indigenous heritage that has survived around the world.

There are particular gifts associated with practicing The Circle Way that make it adaptable and successful in organizational settings. These contributions include the Components Wheel, the Three Points of Leadership (especially the use of a group guardian), the articulation of principles and practices, and the four agreements.

In the history of this work, Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea coined the word “PeerSpirit” as the name of their educational company and the original name of their circle methodology. In 2010, with the publication of their book, *The Circle Way, A Leader in Every Chair*, the movement expanded globally and was rebranded as The Circle Way.

About this series

The Circle Way for Communities of Faith is the fifth booklet in an ongoing series that introduces specific applications and aspects of The Circle Way methodology. The other booklets in this series are:

- [*Understanding Energetics in Circles and Groups*](#)
- [*Understanding Shadow and Projection in Circles and Groups*](#)
- [*The Circle Way for Proactive Aging: A Harvest of Years*](#)
- [*The Circle Way for Nursing Leadership: A Model for Conversation and Shared Leadership in the Workplace*](#)

About the author



Ivy Thomas, M.Div.

Ivy Thomas was ordained as a minister in the United Church of Canada in 2006. She has served for seven years as a conference minister, resourcing 32 congregations in the Kamloops-Okanagan region of British Columbia. In this role, she developed and led workshops that included healthy communications, mission and vision development, conflict management, personnel oversight training, radical hospitality, and team building. In addition, Ivy leads

spiritual retreats for those longing for a deeper, more meaningful relationship with the Holy and is a global colleague and instructor of The Circle Way. Currently, Ivy serves as an intentional interim minister in Victoria, British Columbia. In all these endeavours, she relies on circle practice to enrich the work she does and to empower the community that gathers.

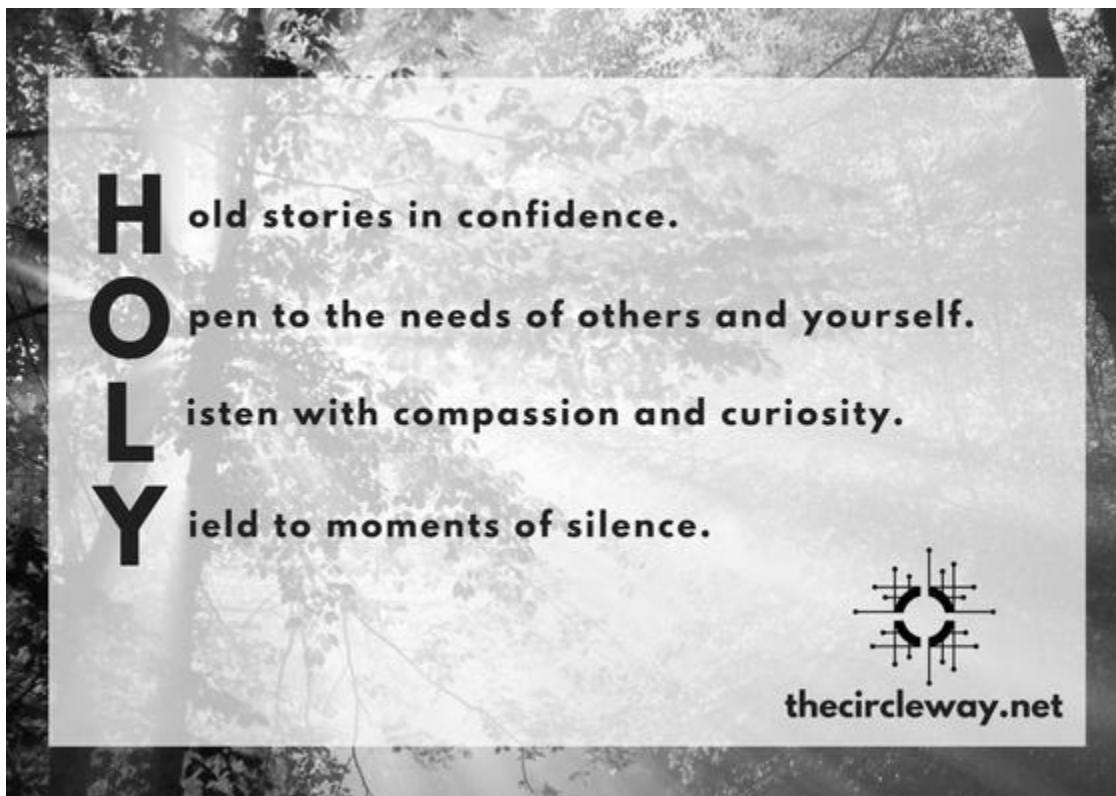
More information

The Circle Way is a movement dedicated to re-introducing and supporting the use of council or circle in western culture. We believe that by rotating leadership, sharing responsibility, and attending to the spirit of shared intention, small groups of ordinary people can align themselves with social awareness, spiritual values, and responsiveness to the pressing needs of the earth, its people, and its creatures.

Facilitators, trainers, and colleagues offer a variety of seminars and consulting services in The Circle Way. For more information, free downloadable resources, or to contact us, visit our website: www.thecircleway.net.

Appendix 1

You'll find downloadable HOLY agreement cards like this in the Resources area of the Circle Way website: www.thecircleway.net



Appendix 2

Moving Forward Chart

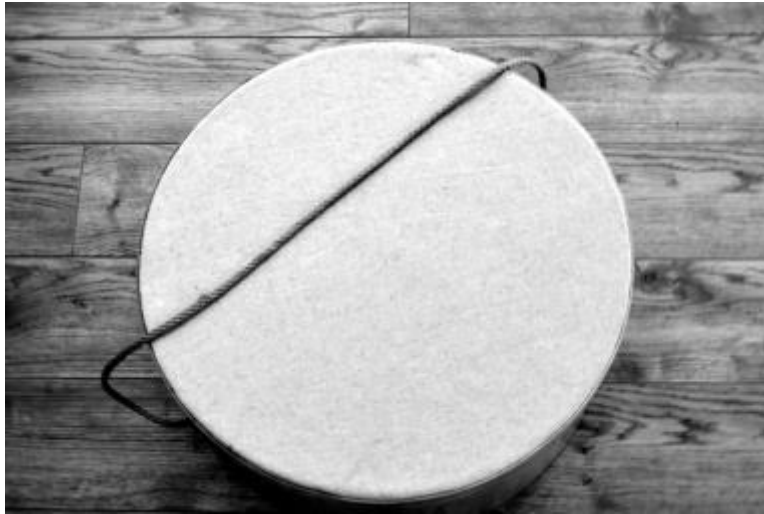
If you are task- and solution-driven, you may want to plan for time, just before check-out, to complete a chart such as the following.

Task	By whom	Resources required	Timeline	Accountable to whom?

Appendix 2

Because my work often takes me on the road, I have developed a traveling circle box that contains everything I need for hosting a circle.

I started with a hat box, which is circular and easy to carry, because of the handle.



I fill it with fabric or scarves in various colors (to cover the hat box), a candle, matches, tingsha bells, laminated HOLY agreements cards, and a few talking piece.



When it's time to create a center, I remove the items from the hat box, cover it with fabric or scarves, and place the other objects on top of it. You can customize your box in any way you wish.

