

TRUST CIRCLES

FOR DISCERNMENT

*Serving laity, leaders, clergy, chaplains of the Greater Lake Norman Region
meeting at Davidson United Methodist Church*

What is it and is it for me?

A Trust Circle is a prayerful listening circle. We are really after encountering the Holy Spirit in our lives not with problem solving. Let's begin with what it is not. It is

- not a prayer group
 although prayer is the key element of the process
- not a sharing group
 although sharing is certainly a large part of it
- not a support group
 although spiritual direction is nothing if not supportive
- not a place for problem solving
 although problems and issues may later be resolved through what happens in this setting
- not a place for fixing, saving, advising
 nor setting each other straight
- nor a therapy or counseling group
- not appropriate for friends, family, working peers, neighbors, etc. to be in the same circle.
 This helps to create and ensure an environment of freedom and trust

What it is:

1. *A Trust Circle is a Spiritual Discipline to help us recognize and respond to God's presence and guidance in the story of our individual lives.*

The focus of a Trust Circle for Discernment is on discerning how God is inviting/leading each person in the group toward wholeness and transformation. People are drawn to the group because of their shared desire for God to be the determining factor in all their choices. When people begin to notice an increased desire to become clearer about and more cooperative with God's presence and guidance they also recognize they need some help to do this! This spiritual discipline is an intentional action on our part to join with a few others to stop our busyness, turn to God, and help each other look and listen for God's movement and invitations in the story of our individual lives.

*It is because one antelope will blow the dust from the
other's eye that the two antelope walk together. African Proverb*

The group (4 people plus an experienced facilitator) meets monthly September through May. Every person in the group shares their unique spiritual journey and every person in the group is a

"spiritual director" for the others in the group ... meaning "that two or more sinful, broken, struggling people come together to listen to the direction of the Spirit" (Henri Nouwen).

2. Holy Listening - a form of Intercessory Prayer

Prayer is rooted in listening for what God's prayer is. Circle members are willing to stay in the presence of God on behalf of another supporting that place where each is alone with God. Through the interceding presence of the group - listening to self, listening to others and listening to the Holy Spirit, the dust is blown from our eyes and we see more clearly the presence and invitations of God in our lives.

3. Critical Elements those involved share are: a willingness

- a) to seek God actively and to wait for God's leading;
- b) to open their spiritual journeys for consideration by others;
- c) to whole-heartedly participate in the group experience by sharing their spiritual journey, by reflective listening and responding, and through intercessory prayer upon the group between meetings.
- d) to honor and practice double confidentiality

TRUST IS KEY. *The core value of a Trust Circle is trust: trusting each other, the process, and the Holy Spirit (the real spiritual director) We trust that what is said within the circle stays within the circle. What is said is said in prayerfulness and confidentiality and does not extend beyond the circle: not to others nor to circle members. When/if you see each other outside the circle, speak of something else.*

Role of Circle Members:

Facilitator: This person readies the physical setting, the opening and closing rituals, keeps time, and makes sure the process is honored in prayerfulness without cross talk or conversation.

Focus Person / Sharer / Presenter

Simply, the presenter speaks from the heart out of his or her life experience: whatever is going on in their life that is capturing their attention; where they see God at work in their life (or wish to). Areas that may be helpful to notice:

- a. your desire for God
- b. the persons and circumstances that seem to draw you to God
- c. the way you sense God involved in your life
- d. your resistance to God or areas of your life from which you exclude God
- e. your deepest, most desperate desires

Listener / Responder

- The group is there to be with the focus person in their experience. The group is not there to problem solve or fix or analyze or provide answers, but to ask questions or provide observations that help the presenter go deeper into the experience, appreciate it more, and/or to meet the mystery or meaning in the experience.

- The group isn't standing outside the experience coaching from the sidelines. The group is there to pray with the presenter, to stand with the presenter in the experience and encourage the presenter in his or her own exploration of what might be happening between that person and God.
- Questions like where is God in this, what is your prayer around this, where is God meeting you in this, is there something in scripture that reminds you of your experience? Questions that are open-ended, to which people do not think they already know the answer or observations like: this reminds me of that place in scripture where ... or this line from a poem. Responses that invite the presenter into his or her own reflection and prayer.

When and How Long Do You Meet?

Once a month intervals between meetings honors that sacred space within each person where ultimately all discernment happens --- meeting usually from September until May. A two-and-a-half hour meeting time allows a spaciousness for the unfolding of the process.

The Process

The time begins with a silent gathering for people to gather their hearts into a common desire for God and of honoring God's Spirit as the primary spiritual director.

- Sharing by one person (10 minutes)

While individuals are sharing, the group listens prayerfully through to the end without interruption.

- Silence (2 to 3 minutes)

The silence is a time for going to God on behalf of the presenter and allowing God to cut through the limits of biases and accustomed ways of responding. We are going to God asking "God what would your prayer be for _____, what question would you have me ask to help the presenter explore / deepen their relationship with you?"

- Response (about 10 minutes)

This is a period of sharing the questions or images or thoughts that have come up in the silence. This is done in a prayerful, gentle rhythm with no cross talk or conversation. Circle members listen to the response of others and move with the flow of the group instead of holding onto a personal agenda for the person who has shared.

- Silence (2 minutes)

During this time people pray specifically (silently or aloud) for the person who has just presented.

- The "Sharing - Silence - Response - Silence" is repeated, with a short break midway, until all members have presented.

- Prayer for absent member
- Reflection on the time together (about 10 minutes)
This reflection is not meant to analyze the time together or to control future outcomes. Instead, it is a gentle looking and noticing, God and the group together, and an honest sharing around what is seen. What has served it or what has gotten in its way.

Trust Circles are for you if . . .

- you are interested in joining others in being a companion and co-listener for the voice of God;
- you are interested in meeting with four others monthly (September thru May) to help each other recognize and be more responsive to God’s voice in the story of your individual lives;
- you are interested in practicing Holy Listening, the heart of the process;
- you are interested in being intentional about creating a safe, prayerful space where each can hear one's inner teacher, the Ever-Abiding Spirit;
- you are willing to be a stumbling beginner each time we meet. We come open, vulnerable, desiring to be present to God’s mystery. We come without having a clue as to what we’re doing or what will occur. We come trusting that the Holy Spirit is the real spiritual director and we are only the Holy’s instruments.

If so, you are invited to participate in the three week required “short course” sessions. Coming to the sessions does not obligate you in anyway but it does help you discern if a Trust Circle is right for you. Contact Ann Starrette for details.

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NOTE: At Davidson United Methodist, we use the Group Spiritual Direction model (used internationally) created by Rose Mary Dougherty, S.S.N.D. through her work at Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation. In her book, *Group Spiritual Direction: Community for Discernment*, she writes of how her awareness for a “group” spiritual direction experience heightened through her reflection on John Wesley’s “class meetings,” the Society of Friends’ (Quakers) Clearness Committee, and Wesleyan scholar David Watson’s model of the Covenant Discipleship groups.”

WHAT OTHERS SAY follows . . .

WHAT OTHERS SAY

“Trust Circles move our life with God from our heads to our hearts. The more I am connected to myself and God, then the more directly I am able to connect with others in my work as a certified coach and a spiritual director. In trust circles our very broken humanness becomes the humus to allow the inner garden to flourish so we can bring forth our gifts to the world.” Don Carroll / Director of the North Carolina Lawyer Assistance

“My trust circle allows me to share my innermost longings with an intimate group of people who LISTEN to me. The opportunity to express what is deep within my soul provides me a safe place to be fully alive and to discern my next right step.” Nicole Greer / The Vibrant Coach, Sherrils Ford, NC

“Most of us while listening to another person are thinking of how to respond. Trust circles require absolute listening without regard to how to respond. Then, in silence and prayer, we search for the best response. I can think of no greater skill that would benefit any minister than the ability to really listen to what people are saying. The Trust Circle experience has sharpened my listening skill immeasurably.”

John Drayer / Former Religion Professor

“Trust Circle is among the most important practices I know. It is the holy breath of God drawing me deeper to a life of faith. For me it is life giving. I am occasionally asked how do I refresh or restore myself and my Trust Circle is certainly one of those ways.” David Lytle, Presbyterian Hospital Chaplain

“The experience has been beyond what I expected or imagined.” Carolyn Noell / Davidson College Presbyterian Church, Stephen Minister and small group leader.

Patience Robbins (www.patience-robbins.com), director of the Spiritual Guidance Program at Shalem Institute of Spiritual Formation (www.Shalem.org), uses the same model but uses the name Sacred Listening Circles. She offers this description: “Sacred Listening Circles, also known as group spiritual direction (and at Davidson are called Trust Circles), are small groups of people who come together and listen to God with and for each other. Four or five people gather monthly, spend some time in silence and then take turns sharing something about their life and receiving responses from the others in the group. These circles are mutual, prayerful, respectful and honor the uniqueness of each person. They cultivate and support a discerning heart, paying attention to Spirit in all of life. Care is taken to offer prayerful listening, which comes out of silent prayer rather than figuring out, giving advice, lecturing or analyzing. A sacred space is created where each person can feel safe, and trust that the Holy One is present, active and loving and thus, can risk sharing what is deep within and be reverently received. Group members agree to keep confidentiality and to pray for each other during and between meetings. The process also provides a brief review at the end of each gathering in order to notice how the group upheld the prayerful listening space for and with each other.”