

A circle, not a meeting

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Their voices were passionate and sometimes poignant: we want a safe space where we can speak openly, listen as non-judgmentally as possible, and hold each other accountable. We want to make room for questions without feeling the need to give answers. We want to share our gifts—from baking to yoga. *And* we don't want what we're doing to be called a meeting! Such were the comments of several young women professionals who gathered for a group I hosted and facilitated.

I'm a spiritual director on the staff of [the Claret Center](#), an organization in Chicago that approaches health holistically—as mental, spiritual, and physical wholeness. Over the past year, Claret has received more and more inquiries from people in their twenties and thirties and has explored how it might provide hospitality to them. I have experience in college chaplaincy and seminary leadership, so it seemed like I might be able to move this idea forward.

I began exploratory conversations with young adults. Some had gone to seminary but were not certain about ordained ministry in the church; others had gone to graduate school for social service professions. Similar questions began to surface: where can I share the challenges I experience with the church as it is today? Where can I get perspective on what I'm thinking and feeling? Who will listen as I reflect on my life and work?

Not all the questions were overtly spiritual, but I sensed a longing for a depth of connection that they weren't finding in their current social, professional, or religious groups. I began to see how crucial conversation is for this cohort, and how much they miss opportunities to meaningfully interact with peers.

At the same time, the young adults I spoke with are reluctant to make major commitments of time and energy to endeavors outside of their current obligations. They're also hesitant to reveal too much of themselves to others, despite saying they want deeper relationships. They are, to quote [several of my colleagues](#), overwhelmed, overconnected, overprotected, and overserved.

For that reason, the new group emphasizes personal connection, along with networking, vocational reflection, and individual and group discernment. As a spiritual director, I listen a lot; I see my role as that of a companion who helps create a safe environment. I encourage participants to engage one another and invite one another into deeper reflection that helps them see the spiritual dimensions that lie at the heart of many serious conversations.

One of my foundations for this group is the *sacred circle of trust* or *peer circle*, which can be broadly described as [an archetype of group process](#). I hope to facilitate in a way that encourages participants to recognize themselves as leaders who listen carefully and share wisdom through conversation and storytelling.

The peer circle is not a congregation. Yet I believe that the relationships that develop can generate a deep and abiding sense of connection and spiritual awareness. That, in turn, can assist participants in noticing the presence of the sacred (however each person defines that) in the ordinary give-and-take of conversation and daily life.

In our initial gathering, we found ourselves incorporating both faith-based and secular traditions and rituals: opening prayer, individual check-ins, space for sharing hopes and frustrations, silent meditation, and evaluating how well we met both the individual and collective needs of those present. The groups was also rigorous about holding me accountable for using the word *meeting* one too many times.

The group has informally agreed to gather for a six-month period. That may be monthly or biweekly; it may mean supplementing face-to-face time with social media—anything is possible at this point. Despite the obvious enthusiasm for the time spent together and the hopes expressed, they're not yet ready to make a formal commitment. But the final decision rests with those who gathered and those who return to our next gathering this month. After all, this is their circle, not mine.