

The gifts of the circle

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The women stood at various points around the large conference room. Each had a large piece of poster board in front of her. For 45 minutes the room was silent except for the sounds of brush on paper.

Using the process of *lectio divina*, I had read [Mark's account of Jesus calming the storm](#) four times. The women meditated on the words that came to mind until each felt ready to paint from the feelings that the passage had brought forth. Then we began to talk about the images each one had painted: dark clouds, streams of light, and a crashing wave.

I have facilitated [this group of young adult professionals](#) for nine months, using the peer circle conversation model. We have gathered at [the Claret Center](#), where I work as a spiritual director, though this exercise in group spiritual direction could work in a variety of settings. In churches, the circle might serve as a structure for a multiple-session adult education offering. It could be adopted in a similar way in seminary settings.

The strengths and weaknesses of any peer circle come from the level of commitment of the participants and their willingness to be vulnerable with one another. When we began, one member said that she had been looking for a place where she would feel supported in her efforts to “grow in wholeness and holiness.” After spending time in the circle, she noted that “when we are together, I am able to express myself openly and honestly and am listened to without judgment.” Additionally, “sharing practices of art, music, and yoga has opened me to the many ways in which the divine is present and active in my life.”

Along with yoga, we engaged in the practice of coloring mandalas—especially appropriate since *mandala* means circle. [These images](#) represent wholeness, a diagram of the cosmos that reminds us of our relation to the infinite.

In such activities, as well as silence, prayer, and sharing from our lives, the circle process has imparted many gifts. One is a “renewed culture of conversation,” as

Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea describe it in their book [*The Circle Way: A Leader in Every Chair*](#). Circles “slow us down and provide a place to stop and listen, to take a breath and consider the fullness of what we want to say to each other.”

This model of group building asks that participants be open and willing to try new things. As the subtitle of Baldwin and Linnea’s book makes clear, everyone in the group can potential step into the role of guiding an activity. For instance, if a colleague came to me and said she was thinking about starting a peer circle, but was not interested in mandalas, I would suggest that she wait to see if group members suggested that as activity.

If they did, she could easily give leadership for that session to the group member who had originally suggested it. If the particular activity wasn’t mentioned or requested, she’d be off the hook. (Though, on the other hand, it can be a powerful learning experience for the facilitator to stretch boundaries and try out activities to which she might not initially feel drawn.)

I have discovered that circle members are more invested when they are asked to pay a small stipend for each session. Setting short-term time frames for a circle—such as six to eight meetings—gives participants the opportunity build a sense of commitment and to move toward re-upping their participation.

In our time together, we’ve found the the circle has responded to a lack that exists in participants’ lives. As one member said, “To experience self-doubt and lack of direction, along with a strong desire to do good work, is in itself difficult; to experience this while feeling isolated is unnecessarily miserable.” In the circle, she felt “seen and heard, which gives me fresh energy to continue grappling with my own work and questions—no longer in isolation, but in community.”