

TRUST CIRCLE for group spiritual direction

A TRIED AND TRUE PROCESS

A proven process for creating space and opening hearts to hear the wisdom of the Holy Spirit. Rather than responding from the house of our heads, we seek to respond from a purer place, the palace of our soul—the Holy Spirit.

Process Flow

(adjust time depending on people and time available)

A normal flow is a two-and-a-half-hour meeting of four or five participants plus a facilitator. The facilitator's role is to keep time and make sure the process is honored in prayerfulness. This looks like a lot of words, and it is, for such a simple process. But after a while it will feel smooth as silk—like you are riding on a cloud of prayers. Enter and see where it takes you.

1. **Begin in Silence** (about 15 minutes). We begin with a centering time to gather our hearts into a common desire for God and to dedicate the time for God's work in our lives and in our world.
2. **Sharing by focus person** (10 minutes). While individuals are sharing, the group listens prayerfully through to the end without interruption—seeking together to be more aware of, and responsive to, God's presence in all of life, in this part of someone's story.
3. **Silence** (2 - 3 minutes). This is a time for making space for God, for allowing God to cut through the limits of our biases and accustomed ways of responding so that individuals might respond to the focus person from a place of freedom. Listeners' intercessory prayer questions:
 - God, what is your prayer for this person?
 - God, what do you want my prayer to be?
 - God, is there anything I need to surrender in order to join your prayer for this person?
 - God, is there anything you want me to say to him/her, or do, on your behalf?
4. **Response** (10 minutes). Sharing the questions or comments that have come up in the silence. A guideline that may be helpful comes from the Quakers: Be neither determined to speak nor determined not to speak. How do we know that what we have to offer is nudged by the Spirit? We can never be sure. The facilitator might need to encourage trust of God's caring love for the presenter, active in silence and in the words. This trust is honored when individuals 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. Consider how you find yourself responding: 1) as usual? 2) from a place of willfulness or "I must"? 3) staying in the presence of God on behalf of this person? 4) or have you primarily gone to your own story or advice giving?
5. **Silence** (2 minutes). Group prays silently for the person who just presented. Focus person may want to write some notes or just reflect on what has been offered.

6. **Body Break** (5 –10 minutes). After the midway break, the pattern of Silence - Sharing - Silence - Response - Silence” is repeated, until all participants have taken their turn as focus person.
7. **Prayer for any absent members** (about 2 minutes).
8. **Reflection on the time together** (5 minutes). This is a time to see how we can move even deeper in this process of observing and sharing with each other what the process was like. It is not a time to analyze or control, but a gentle looking and noticing, God and the group together, sharing what is seen. Focus is on the sense of prayerfulness in the group. Did anything get in the way of that prayerfulness? What was particularly supportive of the prayerfulness?

The Role of Silence

Getting acquainted with the power of silence takes practice.

A Trust Circle is different than other groups. Therefore, right from the beginning we set the tone for a different kind of mutual experience than is usual for people. This is a shut-the-door, set-apart time and space for our “alone/listening” time with God. *“But when you pray, go away by yourself, all alone, and shut the door behind you and pray to your Father secretly, and your Father, who knows your secrets, will reward you”* (Matthew 6:6).

Rather than falling into normal habits of social exchange with each other, we fall into the spaciousness of collective silence. When we enter the circle, we enter in reverent silence as a symbol of surrendering our fragmented mind to God. People who arrive to participate have come from all sorts of “noisy” experiences. Spending some time in silence in which each person simply focuses on the in-and-out of their breathing, a sacred word, or the Jesus Prayer, can be a very healing experience.

Silence is a place of surrender. Holy listening, as practiced in these small circles, is a striving toward total dependence on God to help us come to a place of total surrender where we are able to drop our normal ways of listening and responding. We are totally dependent on God to provide a word/a question/ an image in due season and we are totally dependent on God for our replies—not only what we say but *how we say it*.

Silence is both a means of honoring God’s Spirit, the real spiritual direction, and drawing the group into prayer for one another. Getting acquainted with the power of silence takes practice. Henry Nouwen points out that one of the reasons we cling to external noise is to shut out the voices within ourselves. Learning how to sit calmly and quietly, then sort through the voices vying for attention in our mind, is one of the capacities that gets developed within the circle.

Silence teaches us how to speak. This is a time for making space for God to cut through the limits of our biases and accustomed ways of responding. What we are doing is allowing our agendas to fall away so that we can become response-ABLE to others rather than responsible for others.

The most important thing to understand is that a period of silence does not mean that “nothing is happening.” Silence encourages us to listen deeper, to wait upon the Lord in anticipation of hearing the Spirit’s still small voice. Silence provides the space where sacred ideas, words, images and questions

emerge. Trust is honored when individuals 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.

Role of Focus Person/Presenter

Speaking from the heart

Wherever the action is in your life, this is where God is most involved with you. This is where you are making the choices that determine who you are becoming as a person. Therefore, where the action is should be your focus. We are often blind and need others to help us see more clearly God's movements and invitations. It is always helpful to take stock of what is going on and what God may be quietly up to with us. Alone, we can easily get caught up in the tangle of our own minds, keep going over the same ground over and over again without reaching any conclusion. We can miss whole sides of a matter, imagine things that are not there, or spend unnecessary time on things which merit little consideration. A Trust Circle helps us sort all that out by asking honest questions that invite us to move closer to the mystery of God's movement in our lives. A circle can empower us to stop, look, and listen so that we can see things from a different angle.

When it is my time to present, I speak from my heart about my relationship with God as I am experiencing it (or wish I were) in any area of my life. Areas that may be helpful to notice:

- a. what is my desire for God?
- b. the persons and circumstances that seem to draw me to God
- c. the way I sense God involved in my life
- d. my resistance to God, or where I exclude God
- e. my deepest, most desperate desires
- f. personal prayer questions: What do I want? What am I looking for?
Do I seek God? What does this seeking mean for my life?

In time, we learn not to rehearse our remarks. We learn that we don't need to prepare what we're going to say in advance of our turn to speak. Our comments are less premeditated and more spontaneous. When we speak from the heart, we may even be surprised by what we say. Feelings are complex and can even be contradictory. However, we begin to stretch ourselves and trust the words that arise and the images pressing to be born. We learn to love to be in the place of being a beginner, to make mistakes, to be ourselves.

Journal keeping can be, for some, of immense value for paying attention to God's movement in our everyday, ordinary lives.

*Two are better than one. If one falls down, his friend can help him up.
But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up! Ecclesiastes 4:9-10*

Role of the Listener/Responder

Your listening presence is your greatest gift.

Holy Listening is a form of intercessory prayer, rooted in deep listening for what God's prayer is. As circle members, we are willing to stay in the presence of God on behalf of another. Through our interceding presence the dust is blown from our eyes, and we are able to see and hear more clearly the presence of God in our lives.

Holy listening means listening with the whole self as we trust the Holy Spirit to listen and speak through us. We come to the circle with intentionality (as Moses, to turn from the world). We come to be open, receptive and radically available to listen for a fresh word in due season from the Holy Spirit. While individuals are sharing, the group listens prayerfully through to the end without interruption, seeking together to be more aware of, and responsive to, God's presence in all of life and especially in a part of someone's shared story. It means you give a *Welcome* sign to the presenter who is wondering whether to trust you with his or her thoughts and feelings. Respectful silence, eye contact, body posture, and attentiveness signal that you are listening with empathy and that you are helping to hold a holy space.

Pay attention to what is being said without interrupting, judging, trying to fix or rescue the person speaking. Do not rehearse replies or make comparisons. Shrug off the voices in your head that say:

- She's really off the wall, or
 - I wish he'd get his thinking together, or
 - I'm glad I've resolved that problem in my life.

Intercessory prayer questions:

- a) God, what is your prayer for this person?
- b) God, what do you want my prayer to be?
- c) God, is there anything I need to surrender to you in order to join your prayer for this person?
- d) God, is there anything you want me to do for this person or say to him/her on your behalf?

We tend to come from self rather than going deeper to an open space of freedom. We need to ask ourselves: What is my intent, my motive?—Where am I coming from? - and again - Where am I coming from? It all comes back to our orientation over and over again. Are we coming from ego or listening for God? Remember, we come as a stumbling beginner each and every time, so it may take more than a few circles to begin to notice where we're coming from. As we listen, we need to ask ourselves and keep asking ourselves:

- *Where am I coming from?* • *Am I being reactive?*
 - *Is my own stuff blocking my view?*
 - *Do I have my own agenda?*

As we listen, we give the focus person an opportunity to hear themselves (perhaps for the first time) and to recognize and learn from their own unique journey. We help them to view the obstacles they encounter and to recognize their automatic responses. We help them to notice God's movement and invitations and discern how God may be wooing them to respond in a more loving way. This countercultural space of deep sacred listening gives the focus person (and listeners) added hope and strength—for we discover something about God and about ourselves in the stories of other people.

During the responding time, our purpose is to assist the presenter in accessing their inner teacher, the Holy Spirit, for guidance, rather than providing *our* guidance. The process is honored

when we listen to the responses of others and move with the flow of the group instead of holding onto a personal agenda for the person who has shared.

The group is there to be with the focus person in their experience—not to problem-solve or provide answers but to ask questions or provide observations that help the focus person go deeper into the experience, appreciate it more, and meet the mystery or meaning in it, allowing space for the presenter to name and claim for themselves where God might be wanting to meet them in this experience.

The group isn't standing outside the experience coaching from the sidelines. The group is there to pray with the focus person, to stand with the focus person in the experience and encourage the focus person in his or her own exploration of what might be happening between the focus person and God.

Examples of helpful questions: Where is God in this? What is your prayer around this? Where is God meeting you in this? Is there something in Scripture that this reminds you of this? Ask questions that are open-ended, to which the listeners/responders do not think they already know the answer.

Examples of helpful observations: This reminds me of that place in Scripture, or this line from a poem, where The image that keeps coming up for me is Choose responses that invite the focus person deeper into his or her own reflection and prayer.

It is helpful to the focus person for listeners to mirror back non-verbals of what you heard them say with no edit, no delete, no add. Examples of this are: Tell me about the tears. Tell me about the sad eyes I saw. Where did the courage come from to do that, say that, or think along those lines?

Guidelines for Asking Questions¹

Learning to ask honest, open questions is challenging.

We may slip occasionally into old fixing habits and need forgiveness from others and from ourselves. As the old saw goes, “Forgive and remember!” and try not to make that particular mistake again. It helps to remind ourselves continually that our purpose in this exercise is not to show what good problem-solvers we are but simply to support another person in listening to his or her inner teacher—the Holy Spirit.

In support of the rule “no fixing, no saving, no advising, no setting each other straight,” and in support of our intention to help each other listen for their own inner wisdom, here are some further guidelines:

¹ Compiled and edited by Ann Starrette for Trust Circles for Discernment. Sources: Center for Courage & Renewal: “Courage to Lead” Seasonal Retreat and Group Spiritual Direction Retreat: Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation / updated July 2009

- An honest, open question is one we cannot possibly ask while thinking, “I know the right answer to this, and I sure hope you give it to me.” “Have you ever thought about seeing a therapist?” is not an honest, open question! But, “What did you learn from the experience you just told us about?” is.
- Try not to get ahead of the focus person’s language with your questions. “What did you mean when you said you felt sad?” is an honest open question. “Didn’t you also feel angry?” is not.
- Ask questions that are brief and to the point rather than larding them with rationales and background materials that allow us to insert our own opinions or advice.
- Ask questions aimed at helping the focus person explore his or her concern rather than satisfying our own curiosity.
- Avoid questions with yes-no or right-wrong answers. Remember that the best questions are often simple, straightforward and open-ended.
- If you have an intuition that a certain question might be useful, even if it seems a bit “off the wall,”—once you are reasonably certain that it is an honest, open question—trust it, e.g., “What color is this issue for you?”
- If you aren't sure about a particular question, sit with it for a while, and wait for clarity.
- As a group, watch the pacing of the questions, allowing some silence between the last answer and the next question. Questions that come too fast may feel aggressive, cutting off the deep reflection that can help the focus person.
- If you have asked one question and heard an answer, you may feel a need to ask a follow-up question. But if you find yourself about to ask a third question in a row before anyone else has had a chance to ask one, don’t.

More examples of honest, open questions

- How do past experiences inform your current situation?
- What image comes to mind as you think about this situation?
- How are you feeling as you relate this story?
- Will you say more about (a particular word, phrase, image)?
- Is there another aspect to this situation?
- What advice might a wise friend give in regard to this situation?
- What metaphor describes what you are feeling or experiencing?
- What led you to say what you just said?
- How might that choice play out in your life?

Other responding questions

- What is unfolding for you?
- What invitation/s do you hear?
- What seems to be your next step?
- What seems to be your growing edge?
- What surprised you last week?

Is your spiritual life all you would like it to be?
What has happened recently that has made a difference in
your spiritual life?
What is going on with you spiritually, right now?
What do you think God's prayer would be for you in this situation?

Role of Facilitator

The role of the facilitator is to keep the intent pure.

Facilitators:

- open and close their circle with prayer
- keep time according to agenda
- make sure the process is honored in prayerfulness
- close with a reflection on the time experienced together

The facilitator monitors the questions and comments of those responding, keeping the intent of clearing the blocks within the focus person so that he or she can be clearly and immediately present to the leading of the Holy Spirit, available to whatever might be called for in the moment. This is not an easy role. We are standing watch to make certain that the space remains safe. We are standing guard to protect the space from cross talk, dialogue or conversation.

Because life is a never-ending ebb and flow of learning and forgetting, there will be times when it will be necessary to remind our circle that:

1. our basic intent is to be open, responsive and radically available to the Holy Spirit in the story of our lives.
2. we understand the Holy Spirit to be the real spiritual director; we are only instruments.
3. we come as stumbling beginners desiring to be present to God's mystery without having a clue as to what will happen.

The best person for this role usually is not someone used to dominant leadership, nor is it necessarily an experienced spiritual director. However, the critical factor is that the facilitator be willing to trust God more than they trust their sense of readiness (or lack thereof) as a facilitator. Although the facilitator does not share his or her story, if they feel so led, they may respond to the focus person, but this is best done after everyone else has responded.

A reflection time at the end of the circle provides a gentle looking and noticing:

- How was God present within our circle?
- What helped or hindered our intention?
- Did anything get in the way?
- Was anything particularly supportive?

In addition to facilitating a Trust Circle, this person also agrees to participate in their own facilitators' peer group, not as a facilitator but as a presenter/listener, meeting once a month for two and a half hours with a facilitator.

Session Reflection

Noticing, God and the group together

The reflection is not meant to be an analysis of 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 was seen. Whatever is addressed should be viewed in terms of prayerfulness, what has served it or gotten in the way.

The following questions may be helpful:

- 1) How prayerful were we during this session?
 - How was the quality of our silence? ... of our attention to God?
 - What seemed to take us away from attention to God?
- 2) How well did we stay focused on the spiritual life of each person?
 - ... on the “God relationship” beneath the content of what people presented?
- 3) Where did we get off track?
 - Did we do too much problem solving?
 - Were we too analytical or philosophical?
 - Did we share our own experiences during another’s time?
- 4) When I was the focus person:
 - Was I vulnerable and willing to share what seemed to be called for?
 - Was I open to hearing what others had to say to me?
 - Were there times when the words of another seemed to interrupt or get in the way of my discernment? (This can be a BIG stumbling block.)
- 5) As a listener for others, where did my words or my silence seem to be coming from: A place of trust? A place of competition? My need to feel superior to others or appear learned?
 - Was I willing simply to offer a question, an idea or an image to a person for their consideration and then let it go, or did I keep on pushing it?
 - Did I listen to the questions of others, or did I hold on to my own agenda for the person?
- 6) Is there any particular awareness of prayer that I can take from our time together?
Is there any particular way I would like the group to pray for me?