



This month's tale is by Julia Weaver. Julia is an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ, serving the Dane County Jail. She is a visual artist and completed her Doctor of Ministry in 2009. Her thesis was a work of art; a series of woven sacred garments available for worship/reflection. She is married with four adult children and partners, seven grandchildren and twins expected in 2010. Thank you Julia, for sharing this tale with us.

Circle Tale, February 2010

The Prison Chaplain Who Works in Circle

I have been serving Dane County, Wisconsin as Chaplain for eight years working primarily with women who are incarcerated and occasionally with men and staff. I made a decision early on in this ministry to worship in circle. This seemingly small intention has flavored the entire ministry.

We hold two services on Thursdays in separate locations and we also gather in circle in the following ministries. Tuesday mornings we have a Spirituality Group that draws on the rich and diverse traditions of spirituality and faith to provide individuals with tools for re-entry. Tuesday afternoons Women's Beginnings is a support group for women who have Huber work release privileges or those who have returned to their families and communities from incarceration. It is designed to help women address their recidivism and prepare a plan for becoming contributing members of their families and communities.

On Wednesday morning we have a support group/community service project for women who are in the process of reentry. The Backyard Mosaic Women's Project recently completed an outdoor mural/mosaic/garden at St. Mark's Lutheran Church in South Madison. Women with Huber work release privileges and those who have returned to their communities participate. They can now acquire volunteer hours for their work and these hours earn time reduced from their sentence. In 2010, we have been invited to St. John's Lutheran Church for our second major project which is now in the visioning stage.

PeerSpirit's *Basic Guidelines for Calling a Circle* have been very helpful in this work. I found this resource a great confirmation for our process, as they describe it, "...an ancient form of meeting that has gathered human beings into respectful conversations for thousands of years". It was just plain glorious to have the words that so eloquently described what I had been striving for in our gatherings, such as *intention, thoughtful speaking, deep listening*. We employed essential aspects of these guidelines in the agreements for our Spirituality Group and when I shared the guidelines with the two co-facilitators of Women's Beginnings, we decided to rewrite our group rules as intentions with powerful new language that encourages ownership of choices and behavior and group support for each other. My work has become my own "great teacher and place to rest on the journey".

From the participation and feedback I receive from the women, our intentions bring results. Women who historically have not had a voice in their families and communities are given the opportunity to find theirs. This is not always a comfortable process. In the first years of my ministry I had what I called a 'mutiny' in worship! Women really wanted the traditional lecture style, sitting in rows, being told what to do rather than sitting in circle exploring who they are and what they need to live fully. Since then the protestors have become my biggest supporters, because unfortunately they have returned several times since. But for those women who start the journey to this receptive attitude of thoughtful speaking and deep listening it is apparent that each time they return they have found another piece of the puzzle for recovery and success in their lives. I only wish it could be a little less difficult.

If you have a tale to tell, contact the PeerSpirit office and we'll help you share it.

*For more information on many applications of circle, visit our web site at www.peerspirit.com and subscribe to our monthly Circle Tale newsletter. Your e-mail address will **not** be shared or used by anyone other than PeerSpirit, and you can unsubscribe yourself at any time.*