



This circle tale comes to us from Dr. W. Craig Gilliam, Director of the Center for Pastoral Effectiveness for the Louisiana Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. Dr. Gilliam is an adjunct faculty at Perkins School of Theology, SMU, and has a private practice. He is also co-author of one of our booklets, ***PeerSpirit Circling in Congregational Life***.

Circle Tale, March/April 2007 Learnings for the New Now

A congregation who had been at an impasse contacted me to help them through a difficult situation. As I entered, the first challenge for me was to stay out of the role as the savior, the fix-it person, or give recommendations or advice—an old model for consultants. Clearly, my role was to assist them in finding their own path or next steps.

After several circle meetings with church leadership, the reactivity began to lower, the toxicity remained in check, and creativity and connections began to emerge. We moved from identifying triggering issues to building on their strengths to address the issues identified. I asked, *“With what has surfaced thus far for this community, what conversations need to happen and who needs to be in on those conversations?”*

One of the first questions asked was, *“Can we include everyone in the congregation who desires to participate?”* I agree. Then, I ask the leadership to form a question around which the community conversations can orbit. They decide to use the line of poetry from Mary Oliver, *“Reflecting on where we are: Tell me, what are you going to do with your one wild and precious life?”*

When the whole community convened, the conversation was rich with insight and perspective. As the group moved to creating strategies to move the congregation forward, the energy in the room built. The challenge for both the leadership and myself was to surf the wave of new energy or Spirit that was finding life in this community. To live in the new energy, to stay grounded with so much enthusiasm, at first, seemed frightening, but in time, it became a new way of being and doing life together.

The leadership team moved from needing to have the “right answers,” to being able to hold the healthy tension of questions and “not-knowing”. The circle was the container for the conversations; the people’s questions and conversations became the connectors, and the emerging insights and perspectives became the beckoning voice of the collective wisdom or the divine.

The congregation still faces challenges and the messiness that is part of all community life, but they do it from a different place and in a different way. The questions are part of the quest.

This is one of many stories about recent work I have been doing. After attending the PeerSpirit workshop led by Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea several years ago, I began seeing leadership and congregations in a new way. While it did not undermine the lens through which I viewed communities and their leaders, the PeerSpirit experience deepened and broadened it. In the Center for Pastoral Effectiveness we are working to keep alive a dialogue about change in a world that we are calling the New Now.

Some of the insights we are working with:

1. ***Congregations and organizations are self-organizing systems.*** Creating safe space (a strong container for what is trying to emerge) and being able to hold that space so the necessary spirit or voice can constellate in a manner it chooses is our work.
2. ***The living organism has within it the answers to the challenges and opportunities it faces.*** Thus, our challenge is not to bring answers or solutions or to fix them, but to create the space,



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hold the space for honest conversation to happen, connections to occur, and the collective wisdom to emerge.

3. ***The systemic adaptive issue that the organism faces has more than one right answer.*** Consequently, the paralyzing anxiety produced by thinking there is one right answer and we have to “get it right,” is relieved. We choose, through conversation and connection with each other and our environment, to act. We watch the effect of the action on the context, then we make our next choice about next steps. It becomes a continual dance or ongoing conversation.
4. ***To have the space to ask open, honest, and sometimes difficult questions is significant to healthy, emotionally and spiritually mature communities, for questions have the power to start a person or community on a “quest.”*** We are all, as individuals and congregations/organizations, living a question. How do we speak that question and share the journey with those with whom we work and serve? Can we live with the question in creative ways and not have to have the answer? What is the question you are living?
5. ***Spiritual practice, which fosters ongoing growth and grounding, is essential for effective leadership and for being the guardian in the circle.*** Our presence as leaders has profound impact on the groups we lead. Presence means alignment of heart, mind, body, soul, and spirit. It means all who sit around the hearth, like in councils of old, honor the holy other and glean wisdom from the group. Spiritual practice is the place where our theories move from intellectual concepts to experiential presence.
6. At the root of all our conversations is the question phrased so well by the words of the poet, Mary Oliver, *“Tell me, what are you going to do with your one wild and precious life?”*

To read a longer version of this article published by Duke University click into the new web page for the Center for Pastoral Effectiveness of the Louisiana Annual Conference of the Methodist Church, <http://www.la-umc.org>, under Conference Ministries go down to Spiritual Formation to the Center for Pastoral Effectiveness, click on “Reading List” and then click the article, “Lessons for Leaders in the New Now”.

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

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