



This circle tale comes to us from Dee Irwin, North Carolina. She was asked to facilitate a church meeting to deal with allegations that a trusted employee had abused children in his charge. Thank you Dee.

Circle Tale #26, November 2001 A Church Deals with Allegations of Abuse

I had been asked to facilitate the meeting. The explosiveness of the situation required someone who was not connected to any of the groups. I had agreed to come if I could call the circle, a process that was new for this group. I kept the introduction simple; three practices, four agreements and a talking piece to help us really listen to each other. I reminded them that our intention was to begin the healing process.

I looked at the twelve faces that had gathered around the circle. Black, White, Hispanic. Rich, poor. Old, young. Men, Women. Angry, anxious. Confused, compassionate.

Members of two groups were meeting together for the first time. One represented the Committee on Sexual Abuse for the corporate church. The other the local governing body intentionally designed to represent diverse interests, backgrounds and life experiences. Both groups had lived with the pain and confusion that comes when a trusted employee abuses children in his charge and the children finally break silence. Rumors were rampant, and people felt angry, confused and abandoned.

We knew we had come to this meeting facing a divided governing board, and a pastor who did not want us talking to his board or messing with his congregation. He wanted to handle the situation in his own time and way. The entrance of the media, lawyers and community organizers with their own agendas had narrowed the options. This meeting was designed to begin the healing process for a fractured congregation and community.

I wanted the check-in to move away from the language of shame, blame, and guilt that had left too many of them defending their own perceptions. I reminded them that Spirit does not work in random ways and asked them to think about why Spirit had brought each of them to this church, and ultimately to this circle, at this time. What was the special gift each had to offer in this opportunity to deepen their own healing and the healing of the congregation and the community?

I observed their body language in the silence that followed. The tension was palpable. I could tell they were resisting the process, but too polite to rebel outright. Finally, a tall, white-haired stately looking woman picked up the hand-carved cross that was our talking piece. "I don't know why I am here. I don't want to be. I'd rather be home playing with my granddaughter." Not the beginning I was hoping for.

We moved clockwise around the circle. A 30-something Hispanic woman spoke next. "I don't need healing. I need explanations." The businessman next to her said "Ditto. It hurts me to feel I need healing. I need answers."

The resistance was thick and heavy, but the power of the circle is that every voice is heard. As we moved around the circle, people began to tell their own stories. First one, then another, and slowly the expression on people's faces changed from hostile tension to rapt attention as they shared their stories. Stories of how they had come to be a part of this community of faith and what their lived experience had taught them that was important for this situation--forgiveness, compassion, the importance of listening.

Some had been victims of sexual abuse themselves. Some had been instrumental in creating the programs that made this church such a vital part of the impoverished community that surrounded it. Some lived elsewhere but came to this church to worship because they believed in what it was trying to do. Some lived in the community and watched the prostitutes who worked the corner and the drug deals being made on the church steps at 4 a.m.



I have used circle many times with many different groups, but never in such a highly charged, high stakes situation. I kept thinking of a line from Christina's book *"As much as we may think we know about the nature of being human, the circle knows more."* There was a kind of magic that worked through the circle process that evening as anger and hostility gave way to genuine listening. The circle had opened a way for the individuals who had gathered to enter into dialogue less defended, more compassionate, better able to hear other views. In a very short time, questions were answered and a plan of action agreed upon that included concrete steps to work through the misinformation and misconceptions that had developed. The evening ended with a genuine sense of hope. The container of the circle had held us in a creative tension that made it possible for people to gather the courage they needed to honor the spiritual contract they had with each other. I was reminded once again of how our ordinary acts change the world as anger and fear yield to compassion and mercy and love.

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

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