Introduction to The Soul of Aging:
Using the Circle of Trust® Approach
for Small Group Ministry in Congregational Life

“When physical eyesight declines, spiritual eyesight increases.”
- Plato

“This is the time to begin to think of higher matters than looking ten years younger than we are, wonderful as that can be. We must begin to attend to the inner self now. These years are for allowing the interior life—our continuing questions, our lifelong interests—to direct what we do and who we are.”
- Joan Chittister

Introduction

Many elders today are from a generation of seekers. We meditate, go on retreat, do yoga, engage in service work, and search for the true meaning of spiritual awakening. We sense the immense potential of our aging to “wake us up” as nothing has before. As we age there is a natural movement toward interiority, reflection, and making peace with our past. We yearn to grasp what life has been all about and to come as fully alive as we possibly can before we die, which includes claiming unlived parts of ourselves, creative endeavors, thoughtful shadow work, and a deeper commitment to inner life work and our relationship with God. It is a time of life we want to be guided by our souls.

Aging also presents us with an accelerated curriculum on change and a deep spiritual dive into the paradoxes of loss, transition, and renewal. Consider how we refer to aging as “growing” older, implying that it involves progress and learning, as well as significant skill. It suggests a natural and organic process. The many new books on aging have titles that include active descriptors like “conscious” aging, “authentic, graceful, courageous, wise, spiritual” aging or, as this program claims, “soulful” aging. We seem to sense that aging requires special spiritual qualities and effort and is perhaps even more rigorous than the other stages we have already passed through. (Well, maybe not more rigorous than parenting!)

Sadly, this exploration is often done in isolation. There aren’t many places to have these conversations in an organized way. The Courage & Renewal Soul of Aging Program hopes to change this. It is designed for small group ministry programs where congregants yearn to explore these topics together and to understand, surrender to, and be transformed by the aging process. It offers a community experience where participants consider ways to explore their relationship with God, expand their capacity to love, serve, and forgive themselves and others,
seek peace, and embrace their own deaths. We intuit that we can just get old or we can become Elders who have meaningful contributions to make. There are some tough things to encounter in our aging, but, if we are willing to face them, there are also enormous gifts. We believe these questions are best held in a community of fellow seekers and kindred souls. Thus, in this spirit, we share the curriculum for the journey.

The Circle of Trust® approach is the container for this program. It offers a process that is safe, trustworthy, and time-tested, and is designed to be led by facilitators experienced in it and supported through the Center for Courage & Renewal.

Program Organization

The Soul of Aging is divided into ten, 2 ½ hour sessions. Each chapter offers opportunities to extend the learning for groups or individuals who want to continue with the topics presented in each session. We also offer recommendations for films and books related to each theme.

The arc of this study has been carefully crafted to ensure that the group is ready to enter some of the deeper waters of the program at a gradual pace. Thus, we highly recommend that you follow the order in which the chapters are presented. At the beginning, special attention is given to teaching circle of trust practices and protocols so that the group understands what is expected of them when meeting in this format. For example, in the first session, we introduce the Touchstones for creating safe space, whereas in the next meeting, we spend quite a bit of time focusing on the practice of asking honest, open questions, both of which are used throughout the rest of the program.

In terms of the content, we begin with areas that are perhaps less vulnerable and revealing; later we proceed with some of the more difficult and challenging issues of aging. At the end of the program, themes addressing diminishment and death are offered when the group is more familiar with each other and practiced in holding a safe space.

We highly recommend that you use the first session as an introduction for the group. Once this session is completed, everyone will have a taste of what to expect, and if it isn’t right for them, they can gracefully withdraw. This is also a time to ask for commitment. With the individuals who choose to continue, as the leader, you can create clear boundaries and expectations for participation. For instance, you can emphasize how regular attendance is imperative to building trust in the group, that you won’t be adding members after you begin, and what your meeting schedule and times will be. If an individual knows he or she will miss more than one or two meetings, you should suggest they participate at another time. This first session is also a time when, if you have doubts about someone
being capable of successfully participating in the program, you can choose to find out more about their circumstances and meet with them privately to discuss your concerns. (See the "Special Considerations for Selecting Group Membership" section below.)

To give an idea of the scope of the program, below is a chapter-by-chapter summary. As we began this project, we became intrigued with the notion of what it would look like to draw upon a lifetime of living, learning, and stories as we approach the “last chapter” of our lifespans. The question at the center of The Soul of Aging is: “What does it mean to be spiritually literate as we age?”

The ten sessions that emerged are:

**Session One: Calling in the Ancestors: Visions of Aging**
We begin with an introduction to how aging is a time of change and diminishment but also a rich time when our inner life calls; there are enormous opportunities for growth, learning, and discovery. We learn about the Circle of Trust approach and the Touchstones for the program, while looking at the questions and concerns we bring to this time in our lives. We examine our internalized prejudice towards the aged and invite our mentors who have gone before us to inform the visions of aging we would like to guide us in our journeys.

**Session Two: Spiritual Formation Across the Lifecycle: Living Into the Soul’s Calling**
In this second session we explore our spiritual formation across the lifecycle. Knowing that our vision can be clearer looking back, we take time to reflect on some of the major lessons learned along the way and where God has been present on our journey. We also introduce the practice of asking open, honest questions and explore where life is calling us now.

**Session Three: The Courage to Name and Claim Your Unlived Life**
In our third session we explore the notion of “your unlived life” or the qualities and commitments you may not have found time for in your younger years that are calling out for attention and care now. This can be a time of new freedom and discovery as we find the courage let go of old ways and move into unchartered territories of self-expression.

**Session Four: Pathways to Wholeness**
In this session we work with an essay by Parker J. Palmer called “Fierce with Reality” that invites us to have the courage to face the darker side of our natures and the potential riches found through “shadow work.” We explore befriending our shadow as a path to wholeness and the value of letting go of perfection.
Session Five: Truth and Forgiveness: The Call to Completion
This session offers the opportunity to make peace with aspects of the past, including some of the people and situations where we hold regrets and resentments and where there is the need for forgiveness and healing.

Session Six: Enlightenment in Slow Motion
In this session we explore some of the spiritual gifts that come with aging like the emergence of greater compassion and gratitude, along with ways to nurture and support the natural deepening of the spiritual dimension of our lives. This is a time to let go into God’s deep embrace.

Session Seven: Stories of Divestment: The Foreign Currency of Change
In this session we share our stories of loss, grief, and renewal as we lift up some of the inevitable changes and divestments that are a normal part of the currency of aging. We explore the paradox that it is because of the losses inherent in our aging that our deepest spiritual growth and liberation occur.

Session Eight: The Wisdom of Living In Deep Time
In this session we reflect on the power of our changing awareness of time as we age, and the different qualities of the ways we occupy time. We consider how our use of time reflects our needs and values and what in our life might be calling for more “deep time.”

Session Nine: The Final Stage of Growth
In this session we consider the importance of doing our “spiritual homework,” in preparation for our own deaths while we are still vital and able to do so, in the embrace of a trusting community. We delve into our thoughts about what a “good death” would look like and consider how our spiritual traditions might support us in this exploration.

Session Ten: Generativity, Legacy, and Harvesting Our Lives
In this, our final, session we look at the gifts, experiences, abilities, and wisdom gained over a lifetime and the opportunity to listen for where our deepest values and passions expressed themselves. Participants are invited to consider what they wish to bequeath from their lives to others and write a “legacy letter” that captures the imprint they want to leave behind.

We humbly acknowledge that there is no easy formula to follow for the aging process. This guide offers questions rather than answers. Just like in other stages of our lives, as time and development brought us to new challenges and opportunities, we listen now for guidance and discernment for what is right and true for this new chapter of life.
Language for Referencing the Sacred in the Soul of Aging Program

We, Caryl Casbon and Georgia Noble, want to be transparent about our backgrounds as authors of this program. We are part of the Baby Boomer generation that has often been labeled "seekers." We both eventually found home in the roots of our Christian heritage. Georgia is currently active in the Episcopal Church, while Caryl attends a Presbyterian congregation. Both of us are spiritual directors, and Caryl is an ordained interfaith minister. We both are white, middle-class women. Caryl has lived her entire life on the West coast of the US, while Georgia, originally from the East, moved to the West in the 70’s following in the wake of the human potential movement. While we reference our faiths in the essays, the invitation to participants is to tap into the wisdom of the perennial tradition/s that have given them meaning in order to inform their own journeys into the soul of aging. One of the principles of the Circle of Trust approach is the creation of hospitable space that allows people of diverse backgrounds and perspectives to engage in respectful dialogue and to explore their own relationship with meaning and truth. We use story, metaphors, poetry and art – the languages of the soul – that leave room for each person’s interpretation. In this curriculum, especially created for faith communities, we address themes that are spiritual, and sometimes even religious in nature, but the same intention for inclusivity applies. To this end we have added a 12th Touchstone:

Honor and respect all spiritual traditions. We acknowledge that no language referring to the sacred is privileged over any other. In this circle, we listen for the truth and wisdom at the heart of each tradition and to our own inner teachers.

Our hope is that if we use a word or concept in this curriculum that is not a good fit for you, or any participant, that you will help translate it into language you and they can relate to. While the writers speak from our own primarily Christian traditions, our intention is to present an invitation for you and your group members to explore your own relationship with the topics we present in the program. In that spirit, here are a couple words and some clarification about their meaning in this context:

The Inner Teacher - Parker Palmer speaks very eloquently in A Hidden Wholeness about the universality of the concept of soul, reminding us that it doesn’t matter what we call it but that we name it matters a great deal. Thomas Merton called it true self. Buddhists call it original nature or big self. Hasidic Jews call it a spark of the Divine, at the center of each of us. Humanists call it identity and integrity. And in the Circle of Trust approach, we call it the inner teacher.

Everyone has an inner teacher. The inner teacher is that source of guidance and strength within that helps us find our way through life’s complexities and challenges. Some people find it more helpful to think of this as the voice of the Holy Spirit or the indwelling Christ. Others describe it as their gut instinct or internal
compass. A circle of trust gives people a chance to listen to this source, learn from it, and discover its imperatives for their work and their lives.

**God or Ultimate Reality** - There are many words that humanity has used to refer to God. In this program we have included the following words to refer to this "reality greater than ourselves": God, the Divine, Spirit, the Creator, the Great Mystery and Holy One. This is a profoundly personal choice, and we again invite you to become a spiritual translator and use the language that feels most authentic to your experience and your tradition.

**Finally**, in the spirit of "truth in advertising," this program has a specific intention of exploring the spiritual dimension of aging, so if someone has strong "allergies" to spiritual work, references and language, this is probably not the program for them. Instead, a more traditional circle of trust retreat might be better for them.

**Who Leads the Program?**

The Circle of Trust approach is a highly nuanced and intentional way of being together which requires that the leaders be experienced in the process and be prepared by studying and practicing the materials involved. We suggest as you consider a program for your congregation that you start small with a group of 6-12 people. We also suggest you co-lead the group, if possible. Once participants have been through the initial experience, they can become guides for others, under your supervision, if you wish to expand it to a larger effort in your community. If this is your intention, your first group may be by careful invitation to those who you think are appropriate for this level of inner work, so that from that group you can select people suited for leadership of future groups.

**Special Considerations for Selecting Group Membership for the Soul of Aging**

Since this program is designed for people in “the last chapters” of their lives, or who are at least approaching them, we want to respectfully lift up a few special, age-related conditions when selecting membership.

Again, some group leaders may choose to quietly select a core group of people in their congregations whom they know would most benefit from this program and, after a successful "trial run" with this group, open up the next offering of it to the wider community. If you are grooming others to help you facilitate, asking them to read *A Hidden Wholeness* by Parker Palmer, as they experience the curriculum is recommended, for it explains the "DNA" of the process. The more experience you have with the Circles of Trust approach the better.

1. This work is always invitational; no one should be coerced into participating under any circumstances. To successfully participate in a Circle of Trust program, you need to have the cognitive capacity to learn some new skills
and have the willingness to practice and follow them while in the program. There are not only a set of Touchstones that we teach and follow, which are essential for creating a safe group experience, but there are also practices for a different way of listening to one another, using what we call open, honest questions. If someone is mentally compromised or unable or unwilling to learn and follow these guidelines, this is not the group for them. They will not only be frustrated and possibly embarrassed, but they also can create unsafe conditions for others.

If an individual is serving as a caretaker for someone who is cognitively impaired, they should not bring him or her to the group. We acknowledge how important it is for caretakers to receive support and encourage your community to consider how to help them so that they can participate in the program.

2. If someone has experienced a recent loss, i.e. is widowed, and has a need for a grief group, this may not be the place for them. The Soul of Aging curriculum is designed to follow the topics listed above and is not prepared to focus on one person’s needs. If you know that someone is grieving intensely, you may want to have a conversation about the difference between this group and a grief group and refer them on, if appropriate, with the promise of welcome in a future group.

3. We have found that there are generational differences among the aging. Some of us have a lifetime of inner work and spiritual practice and have grown up talking honestly about ourselves, our feelings, and our stories in various contexts. There are also some elders who have not had many opportunities for inner work that involves exploring painful aspects of their lives, feelings, and regrets and sharing these insights with others. It is simply too uncomfortable and vulnerable for them to begin now. There are also elders looking for places to tell their stories and be heard by an audience but who do not want to listen to others. While we invite stories in this program, if you have people who are seeking an audience for their storytelling, on their own terms, this group will not fill their needs. These people may be more interested in a memoir class at this time. This process is highly organized, requires strong leadership, and needs individuals interested in cooperating with the design. While these are difficult topics to acknowledge, if you address these generational differences upfront, you may prevent some uncomfortable, hurtful, and even damaging problems going forward. We have included an application form below that can aid you in your discernment about who is appropriate for this group work.

4. Many people of advanced years have hearing problems. These problems don’t usually interfere with participation, but you may need to work
together to make sure they can hear the leaders, each other, and clearly understand the instructions, etc. Often just offering printed instructions (and larger print may be in order) to the group offsets many of the problems relating to hearing, as well as careful selection of the site for convening meetings. The handouts at the back of this guide offer the instructions for easy printing as well as the “third things.”

In a congregational setting, we recommend an application process after the introductory session, as well as a conversation with relevant leaders about the individuals applying to avoid unnecessary problems when you begin your groups. See a sample application form and suggestions for meeting with church leadership as follows:
Application for The Soul of Aging

1. What attracts you to The Soul of Aging at this time? What is your hope for yourself if you participate?

2. What questions do you bring to this study? How much thought have you already put into your journey with aging? What are some of the feelings you have about aging?

3. Full participation is essential for developing the trust necessary for everyone in the group to have a satisfying experience. Can you commit yourself to all the meeting times? (List dates here) If you know you will miss more than one meeting, waiting until you have the space to do the group is advised.

4. While sharing in the group is always optional and done at a pace and depth that honors the soul, it is a meaningful aspect of the program. How do you feel about sharing your journey and some vulnerable and intimate aspects of your life openly with others?

5. Are there any circumstances in your life that consume most of your energy and might make it difficult for you to participate in a group process? While we will be exploring issues around loss, grief, and death, if you are in the middle of a deep loss or transition, a grief group or individual counseling might serve you better.
Qualities Essential for Leadership Using the Circle of Trust® Approach

The following considerations for leadership of this circle of trust approach is taken and modified from the User’s Guide to *A Hidden Wholeness*, written by Sally Hare and Caryl Casbon.

People who lead circles of trust in any form must understand that the leader’s first task is to do their own inner work, integrating the principles and practices of the Circle of Trust approach into their own lives before they try to offer them to other people. In that spirit, we invite you to assess your own readiness to lead this small group in your congregation by reflecting on the questions we pose here and perhaps discussing them with a trusted friend.

Ask yourself, **Am I ready to serve from a calm presence and strong sense of self in the midst of the challenges of a group?** If people trust your ability to hold a safe space because they see you inhabiting such a space yourself, then you may have a chance to do this work well. People know instinctively whether a leader has a capacity to work with such issues as diversity in its many guises, awkwardness, conflict, power struggles, challenging personalities, and even failure. A leader must be able to read the group calmly, not get his or her ego involved, and adjust to the group’s evolving needs.

This form of leadership requires a commitment to working through our own wounds and shadows for, as we have learned, pain that is not transformed is pain that is transmitted. As leaders, we need ways to address our own suffering so that we do not use the circle to do our shadow work or, worse, unconsciously act our shadow out in the group. A leader of this work recognizes when a group is “hooking” their shadow and moving them into reactivity, thus making the space unsafe. She also recognizes how to reach out for help from a co-facilitator, a spiritual director, friend, therapist, etc. so that the group does not get lost in the leader’s shadow land.

There is an important paradox here. While leaders of circles of trust must be appropriately transparent and vulnerable, lest people feel that they are distancing themselves from the process, at the same time they must have the restraint and the professionalism not to “breathe up all the oxygen” in the room. The rule is simple: “We need this work as much as the people we are serving—but if we need it too much to lead well, we won’t be serving them well.” Ask yourself, **Do I have what it takes to do my own inner work outside of this process, so that I am able both to participate in and lead it well?**

At the heart of all that we do in circles of trust is our belief that “we teach who we are.” Those of us who lead such circles know that they are safe only in the hands of people who are grounded in their own integrity, who are in touch with and
guided by their souls. As a group leader, your identity and integrity are the most important qualities you have to offer. Embodiment is where everything begins: your presence and your clarity about the ground on which you stand set the tone and the stage for what is possible in a circle of trust.

The choice of inner practices to find this solid ground is individual. However, a regular commitment to slowing down, to solitude and silence, to some form of reflection through journaling, or spending time in nature are examples of practices that help sustain your center. Ask yourself, **What practices work best in supporting my own inner work, and how can I stay faithful to them?**

Finally, those of us who lead have learned that it is vital to have trusted colleagues and friends who can challenge us and help create these circles for others: it is wise to not “go it alone.” We encourage you to choose a partner for co-creating and co-leading this group. Circles of trust are meant to help create community and are best planned in community with others who share that commitment, who will speak truth, share feedback, and keep us on track through mutual discernment. Besides, it’s more fun that way! So we ask you to ask yourself one more question, **With whom would I like to partner in co-creating this group?**

**Note to leader:** Participation in *The Soul of Aging* alumni retreat and leadership training does not qualify you to facilitate Circle of Trust® programs in which “Circles of Trust” is capitalized and followed by a copyright symbol. This will help avoid confusion with programs led by facilitators prepared by a two-year program from the Center for Courage & Renewal. If you are interested in deepening your work with the Circle of Trust® approach by becoming a facilitator, website: [http://www.couragerenewal.org/programs/facilitator-prep](http://www.couragerenewal.org/programs/facilitator-prep).

**Principles of the Circle of Trust® Approach**

“If we are willing to embrace the challenge of becoming whole, we cannot embrace it alone—at least, not for long. We need trustworthy relationships and tenacious communities of support to sustain the journey toward an undivided life. Taking an inner journey toward rejoining soul and role requires a rare but real form of community that I call a ‘circle of trust’.”

- Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness*

- Everyone has an inner teacher: Every person has access to an inner source of truth, named in various wisdom traditions as identity, true self, heart, spirit, or soul. The inner teacher is a source of guidance and strength that helps us find our way through life’s complexities and challenges. A circle of trust gives people a chance to listen to this source, learn from it, and discover its imperatives for their work and their lives.
• Inner work requires solitude and community: In a circle of trust we make space for the solitude that allows us to learn from within while supporting that solitude with the resources of community. Participants take an inner journey in community where we learn how to evoke and challenge each other without being judgmental, directive, or invasive.

• Inner work must be invitational: A circle of trust is never a share or die event but a time and place where people have the freedom within a purposeful process to learn and grow in their own way, on their own schedule, and at their own level of need. From start to finish, this approach invites participation rather than insisting upon it. The inner teacher speaks by choice, not on command.

• In a circle of trust we create a hospitable space that allows people of diverse backgrounds and perspectives to engage in respectful dialogue. We use metaphors to represent cycles of life, such as the alternation of darkness and light, death and new life that are shared by everyone in a secular, pluralistic society regardless of philosophical, religious, or spiritual differences.

• An appreciation of paradox enriches our lives and helps us hold greater complexity: The journey we take in a circle of trust teaches us to approach the many polarities that come with being human as “both–ands” rather than “either–or’s,” holding them in ways that open us to new insights and possibilities. We listen to our inner teacher and other voices in the circle, letting our own insights and the wisdom that can emerge in conversation check and balance each other. We trust both our intellect and the knowledge that comes through our bodies, intuitions, and emotions.

• We live with greater integrity when we see ourselves whole: Integrity means integrating all that we are into our sense of self, embracing our shadows and limitations as well as our light and our gifts. As we deepen the congruence between our inner and outer lives we show up more fully in the key relationships and events of our lives, thereby increasing our capacity to be authentic and courageous in life and work.

• A “hidden wholeness” underlies our lives: Whatever brokenness we experience in ourselves and in the world, a “hidden wholeness” can be found just beneath the surface. The capacity to stand and act with integrity in the gap between what is and what could be or should be—resisting both the corrosive cynicism that comes from seeing only what is broken and the irrelevant idealism that comes from seeing only what is not—has been key to every life-giving movement and is among the fruits of the Circle of Trust approach.
Practices of the Circle of Trust® Approach

“In this culture, we know how to create spaces that invite the intellect to show up, to argue its case, to make its point. We know how to create spaces that invite the emotions to show up, to express anger or joy. We know how to create spaces that invite the will to show up, to consolidate effort and energy round a common task. And we surely know how to create spaces that invite the ego to show up, preening itself and claiming its turf! But we seem to know very little about creating spaces that invite the soul to show up, this core of ourselves, our selfhood.”

- Parker J. Palmer, A Hidden Wholeness

- We create spaces that are open and hospitable but resource-rich and charged with expectancy: In a circle of trust, we are invited to slow down, listen and reflect in a quiet and focused space. At the same time, we engage in dialogue with others in the circle—a dialogue about things that matter. As this “sorting and sifting” goes on and we are able to clarify and affirm our truth in the presence of others that truth is more likely to overflow into our work and lives.

- We commit to no fixing, advising, saving, or correcting each other: Everything we do is guided by this simple rule that honors the primacy and integrity of the inner teacher. When we are free from external judgment, we are more likely to have an honest conversation with ourselves and learn to check and correct ourselves from within.

- We ask honest, open questions to “hear each other into speech”: Instead of advising each other, we learn to listen deeply and ask questions that help others hear their own inner wisdom more clearly. As we learn to ask questions that are not advice in disguise, that have no other purpose than to help someone listen to the inner teacher, all of us learn and grow.

- We explore the intersection of the universal stories of human experience with the personal stories of our lives: Guided conversations focused on a poem, a teaching story, a piece of music, or a work of art—drawn from diverse cultures and wisdom traditions—invite us to reflect on the “big questions” of our lives, allowing each person to intersect and explore them in their own way.

- We use multiple modes of reflection so that everyone can find their place and pace: In the Circle of Trust approach, we speak and we listen. We explore important questions in large group conversation and dialogues in small groups. We make time for individual reflection and journaling. We respect nonverbal ways of learning, including music, movement, and the arts. We honor the educative power of silence and the healing power of laughter. Together we
weave a “tapestry of truth” with many and diverse threads, creating a pattern in which everyone can find a place that both affirms and stretches them.

- We honor confidentiality: Participants in circles of trust understand that nothing said in these circles will be revealed outside the circle and that things said by participants will not be pursued when a session ends, unless the speaker requests it.

For more about the principles and practices of the Circle of Trust approach in theory and in practice, please see Parker J. Palmer’s *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004).

**The Touchstones: Creating Safety for the Inner Journey**

As mentioned above, the Center for Courage & Renewal and its community of facilitators have developed a set of what we call Touchstones or agreements for how we will act in the circle. If followed faithfully, these Touchstones keep the community in a trustworthy container for the duration of their time together. Holding the group to these Touchstones, lovingly and gracefully, is one of your most important tasks as a facilitator. Anytime you feel that things are going a little “off track” look to the Touchstones to see which one is being violated and what needs to be done about it.

We review these Touchstones at each meeting, because the behaviors we agree to in a circle of trust are countercultural to how we usually act in groups and, at times, actually go against the training in our professions. Please review these carefully and begin to consider embodying them as you prepare for leading this small group process:

**Circle of Trust® Touchstones**

- **Extend and receive welcome.** People learn best in hospitable spaces. In this circle we support each other’s learning by giving and receiving hospitality.

- **Be present as fully as possible.** Be here with your doubts, fears, and failings as well as your convictions, joys, and successes, your listening as well as your speaking.

- **What is offered in the circle is by invitation, not demand.** This is never a “share or die” event! During this retreat, do whatever your soul calls for, and know that you do it with our support. Your soul knows your needs better than we do.

- **Speak your truth in ways that respect other people’s truth.** Our views of reality may differ, but speaking one’s truth in a circle of trust does not mean
interpreting, correcting, or debating what others say. Speak from your center to the center of the circle, using “I” statements and trusting people to do their own sifting and winnowing.

- **No fixing, no saving, no advising, and no correcting each other.** This is one of the hardest guidelines for those of us in the “helping professions.” But it is vital to welcoming the soul, to making space for the inner teacher.

- **Learn to respond to others with open, honest questions** instead of counsel, corrections, etc. With such questions we help “hear each other into deeper speech.”

- **When the going gets rough, turn to wonder.** If you feel judgmental or defensive, ask yourself, “I wonder what brought them to this belief?” “I wonder what they’re feeling right now?” “I wonder what my reaction teaches me about myself?” Set aside judgment to listen to others—and to yourself—more deeply.

- **Attend to your own inner teacher.** We learn from others, of course. But as we explore poems, stories, questions, and silence in a circle of trust, we have a special opportunity to learn from within. So pay close attention to your own reactions and responses, to your most important teacher.

- **Trust and learn from the silence.** Silence is a gift in our noisy world, and a way of knowing in itself. Treat silence as a member of the group. After someone has spoken, take time to reflect without immediately filling the space with words.

- **Observe deep confidentiality.** Nothing said in a circle of trust will ever be repeated to other people.

- **Know that it’s possible to leave the circle with whatever it was that you needed when you arrived** and that the seeds planted here can keep growing in the days ahead.

- **Honor and respect all spiritual traditions.** We acknowledge that no language referring to the sacred is privileged over any other. In this circle, we listen for the truth and wisdom at the heart of each tradition, and to our own inner teachers.

**Design for Each Session**

Each session follows the basic pattern defined below and is designed to last 2 ½ hours.

**Note to leader:** Brief, italicized quotations and thoughts at the beginning of each session can be put up on news print, posters, and white boards in the gathering space, as well as serving as inspirational material for the leader.
The Gift of Hospitality: Welcome, Opening Reading & Silent Reflection
The welcome is important in setting the tone of hospitality. The session begins with a minute or two of silence, allowing time for people to settle in, followed by a reading of an essay on the session’s theme. Though silence is a scarce commodity in our culture and makes many people nervous, it is an important ingredient for self-reflection and a staple in a circle of trust. After reading the essay, participants are invited to reflect and journal on a few questions.

Grace in Community: Reading the Touchstones
Before starting the sharing, we read the Touchstones, which will help you name clear boundaries for the circle. These are the kinds of boundaries that create safe space for the soul. We revisit them at every meeting.

Meeting on Sacred Ground: Introductions & Check-ins
Once the Touchstones have been read, each person is invited to share something with the group from the journaling and reflections above. An important part of each session is “being alone together,” having the opportunity to listen and be listened to, and hearing yourself speak your thoughts into the circle of trust.

Deep Speaks to Deep: A Further Exploration
At this time, another “third thing” is introduced to deepen the theme for the session. It may be worked with individually, in pairs, in small groups, or in the large group.

Amen, So Be It: The Closing Circle
We end our circle by inviting participants to settle into silence, then speak briefly about their insights, feelings, or questions about this session.

Final Reminders: Before ending, we ask that you lift up the importance of the suggestions in the "Extended Learning" options, especially the ones that build on what you have done in the session, and remind people of when you meet next, etc.

Grace Note
The grace note is a blessing for aging, repeated at the end of each session.

Extending the Learning
Suggestions for activities, reflections, or practices for in-between the sessions are offered at the end of each session. We recommend that at this time you agree and confirm when and where your next
meeting will be convened. There are also some suggestions for adding another meeting on the same theme, which is optional!

**Note to leader:** While these meetings are designed to last 2½ hours, the time given to each section will vary between the groups, depending on group size, etc. We suggest you choose one location for your meetings that is quiet, protected from interruptions, and serves as a constant and consistent container for your work together. If the group needs a break, you may choose where to fit one in between the segments. Including a break within a longer and silent reflection time is a good way to keep the break contained. For example, “You will have 15 minutes for reflection, please fit in taking care of your physical needs as well.”

Keep in mind that when working with an older population, the time of day you meet should be a consideration, as well as the length of these meetings. As leaders, you are invited to decide the best timing, spacing, etc., that will work realistically with your group. In some cases, i.e., in a retirement home, shorter meetings will be necessary, in which case one session can be divided in half and serve as the basis for two meetings.

**The Work Before the Work: Advance Preparation for Soul of Aging Meetings**

As a group leader for a Soul of Aging Circle of Trust program, just as in all leadership roles, there is some “work before the work” to consider; that is, preparation to be accomplished before your group shows up. Below is a brief list of tasks to address before each group convenes. Obviously, you don’t want to wait until the last minute to prepare, as you will see below.

This guide also provides more detailed and specific instructions for many of the sessions as needed, so be sure to refer to the “**Note to the Leader**” at the top of the session guidelines.

Tasks to address before you begin:

1. Decide if you are going to charge something for the group. Many congregations charge a “suggested donation” to cover the cost of materials etc. Be aware that there are costs involved. Will you provide folders or notebooks for the participants to keep track of the handouts? How will the copying of handouts be done?

2. Where will the group take place? Will you meet at your church or in someone’s home? As mentioned, keeping the space as consistent as possible is important. How will you make the space welcoming and hospitable? Do you want to create a centerpiece of some kind? It can be
as simple as a flower and a candle or more elaborate depending on your preference.

3. Will you provide some kind of food or drink for people? In a 2 ½ hour session you don’t want food to be a distraction. Some people prefer no food or keeping it simple with water or coffee and tea. If you decide to offer something you can ask the group to share in providing treats. Inviting the group to come 30 minutes early for refreshment and fellowship is another option, as is a pot luck.

Tasks to address before each group:

1. A week before the group convenes be sure to send out an email reminder of the time and place of your gathering, and what people need to bring. This reminder will hopefully decrease confusion and increase attendance. While you have a commitment from people to faithfully participate, ask them to let you know if something has come up so you can share with the group why they are not there. This helps with continuity, and discourages people from slipping out the back door, so to speak. Sometimes people find this work isn’t for them, but if they choose to withdraw, that should be done with a conversation with the leaders.

2. Carefully read the instructions, essays, and poetry for the upcoming session, and spend time journaling on the formation questions that you will be asking the group to respond to. This way, when you read the questions aloud to the group, you have experience with them and may choose to share a thought or insight you gained by working with them in advance, from your own experience, to help them begin.

3. Have nametags available if the group doesn’t know each other.

4. Copy the handouts needed for the session. Some of the sessions require extra art supplies; be sure you are looking ahead and preparing for this.

5. If you are co-leading, schedule plenty of time to plan together in preparation for your meetings. You can share your journaling responses with one another, and divide up who is leading what, discern timing, adjustments, etc. Also, make time to reflect on how the last session went, any concerns you might have about someone or a group dynamic, and any course corrections that may be in order at this time.

A Few More Resources
Before beginning, there are a few more resources we want to share with you, as the group leader, which include a letter you can use when you invite participants to *The Soul of Aging* and an evaluation form for the program when it concludes, as well as some suggestions about how to introduce the curriculum into your congregation.

**Letter for Participants**

Below is a letter you can modify to fit your setting. You may email or send it to potential participants you think would be interested in the program. Since *The Soul of Aging* invites vulnerability and deep sharing, it is not for everyone. This program is probably different from other groups in your congregation; you want to make sure that the nature of the work is clear as people are discerning whether this is right for them. If individuals want to know more about circles of trust before committing to it, you can refer them to *A Hidden Wholeness.* As mentioned earlier, the first session will serve as an introductory session, where participants will receive an experience of the process, after which time you will ask each person to commit to the program once they know what they are getting into. Also, this will be when you, as the group leader, can also discern if there is someone who you consider unfit for the program.

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“Beautiful young people are accidents of nature, but beautiful old people are works of art.”
- Eleanor Roosevelt

Dear [participant name],

You are invited to participate in *The Soul of Aging*, a small group program consisting of 6-10 members of our congregation who are interested in doing inner work around the challenges, joys, and possibilities involved in the aging process. This is a ten-part session series that will last 2½ hours each session [or however long you’ve decided], led by [your name and the name of your co-facilitator].

Starting Date:
Time:
Location:
Register by:
What is The Soul of Aging?

Based on the pioneering work of Dr. Parker J. Palmer, a process called the Circle of Trust® approach has been developed through the Center for Courage & Renewal that is designed to create a safe, confidential, and sacred space where participants support one another in accessing the voice of their soul. I am excited to be offering this to our congregation, having recently participated in an institute where I was prepared to lead this program using a curriculum called The Soul of Aging. Through this curriculum, we will learn how to listen deeply to one another and how to create spaces that are safe for honest sharing and self-discovery. It promises to be a significant contribution to the fabric of who we are as a congregation.

This ten-session series is for people who yearn to explore these topics together and who long to understand, surrender to, and be transformed by the aging process. The themes address many of the spiritual aspects of this season of our lives, including questions of forgiveness, where we are in our spiritual development, what aspects of ourselves are still yearning for expression, our relationship with time, how to love and serve others, and the notion of befriending our own deaths. (See chapter descriptions below). Clearly these themes invite a level of honesty and self-disclosure along the way. If you are drawn to, and long for such an exploration, please consider this program!

If you have any questions, you can contact me at: [your email address or phone number]. Please let me know if you would like to register by [date]. Space is limited to [12 people or whatever you decide], so register early to ensure a place in the group. All participation in a circle of trust is optional, but we ask that if you sign up for the program you commit to attend all sessions.

I sincerely hope you can join me for this exploration of The Soul of Aging!

Warmly,

Your name
Phone number
Email address

[Attach chapter descriptions to e-mail listed earlier in this introduction.]
The Soul of Aging Evaluation

Dates of Program:

Your Name:

Name of Your Church/Congregation/Community:

1. When I reflect about participating in The Soul of Aging, what stands out as most beneficial to me is:

2. The session that spoke most deeply to me was:

3. What I learned about the voice of my soul was:

4. What I learned about myself, at this time in my life, was:

5. What I learned about my fellow group members was:

6. What I hope to integrate into my life going forward is:

7. A suggestion I have for improving the program:

8. My thoughts about the leadership of the program:

9. Something else I would like to share at this time:

Note to leader: You can alter this evaluation form to meet your needs. Use it several times throughout the program as a way of informing your leadership or use it to report back to congregational staff about the impact of the program. If you don’t want to take up group time, you can email this evaluation after the program is completed.
Practical Tips for Bringing The Soul of Aging Into Your Community

The circle of trust process for small group ministry can be difficult to describe and may vary from expectations based on past group experiences in your congregation. The best way to understand a circle of trust is to experience it, so we encourage you to invite key stakeholders and influencers to your introductory session. One essential component of leading this approach is determining whether there is an opening in your community for transformational work or opportunities for deepening the spiritual journey.

Arrange a meeting with your congregational leaders to talk about The Soul of Aging. Indicate that you would like to offer it to the community through ten sessions, either weekly, bi-weekly, monthly, or whatever format works best in the community. Pay attention to how you describe this new approach in order to gain acceptance from the congregational staff and lay leaders. Review the guide with leaders and invite one or two of them to be a member of your initial program, if appropriate.

Nonverbal and verbal advertising is essential. Here are some ways this program may be described:

- a process to strengthen one’s self-awareness, with the help of others;
- a space to deepen our conversation with ourselves, through tangible practices and specific guidelines;
- a group in which powerful inquiry about the spiritual life can happen in a safe and confidential context;
- an opportunity to practice deep listening and respectful speaking, which can ultimately infiltrate and strengthen congregational life beyond the group.
- a counter-cultural approach to the problem solving, analytical, fast-paced world in which we spend most of our time.

Once a series is completed remember to do "back advertising." Remind the community that the series has just ended and include some comments in printed materials from members of the small group.

Keep a record of each time you meet that includes your personal notes for each session (what you did and how it was received) and an evaluation of each session.
Once the program begins, keep membership constant. Everyone completes all the sessions together. Stress that you expect 100% attendance and that others will not be allowed to join once you begin. Keep the names of those who are interested in the next Soul of Aging series.

There may be a request from members to include time for checking-in, etc. Sometimes this request comes after many sessions. You will notice as you use these sessions that we "check in" with one another in a specific way around a "third thing." Trust that members will find other ways to connect outside the small group. If there is a desire for more informal socializing, you can meet first for a potluck dinner before starting the formal meeting. Offering a 30-minute “fellowship time” with lite refreshments before the group begins is another way to help meet this need.

It is often difficult to transform an existing small group, with its own culture and norms, into a circle of trust. It is advisable to start an entirely new group.

About the Center for Courage & Renewal

Since 1997, the Center for Courage & Renewal, through its network of over three hundred facilitators in the U.S., Canada, Great Britain, and Australia, has created a unique approach to renewing personal identity, professional integrity, and vocational vitality for people in education, healthcare, non-profit leadership, philanthropy, business, the law and other walks of life.

This approach—rooted in the work of Parker J. Palmer, the Center’s Founder and Senior Partner—is being offered to clergy and people of faith through a program funded in part by the Lilly Endowment, Inc.

Why Programs for Clergy and People of Faith?

Leaders of religious communities are called upon to negotiate multiple roles: spiritual guide, scholar, counselor, chief financial officer, manager, confidant, teacher, friend, and, for many, partner, spouse, and parent. These roles carry conflicting expectations that—interwoven with the mythology around what it means to be a “religious leader”—create a variety of maladies that are far too common in ministry.

If religious leaders are to hold these tensions in ways that open rather than break their hearts, they need spiritual practices that keep them grounded in a place of personal wholeness. Leadership, service, and ministry, rightly understood, require more than knowledge and skill. Leaders must learn how to listen to the “inner teacher” in a community of discernment and find the courage necessary to follow the guidance they receive.
The Circle of Trust® Approach

Using an approach to spiritual formation called the Circle of Trust approach, and under the guidance of well-prepared facilitators, Courage & Renewal programs offer safe and disciplined spaces where leaders can remember who they are and deepen their sense of calling. The Circle of Trust approach is distinguished by principles and practices intended to create a process of shared exploration—in retreats, programs, and other settings. These principles and practices are grounded in the Center’s core values, which spell out the foundational beliefs and intended purposes for our work with individuals, groups, and organizations.

Courage & Renewal Programs…

1. help clergy and lay leaders “rejoin soul and role” by reclaiming their authentic vocations and renewing their passion for faithful leadership in the communities that they serve;

2. offer leaders a meaningful break from the demands of daily life, an opportunity to slow down and take a journey of regeneration;

3. focus on deep listening in community, to ourselves, to each other, and to that of God in every person;

4. create a soul-safe space for personal and communal discernment about questions of meaning and purpose, calling and ministry;

5. explore principles and practices that can help sustain spiritual and vocational vitality in individuals and congregations;

6. model a trustworthy form of “life together” that supports the inner journey, strengthens us for work in the world, and can be taken home to help renew family, workplace, and community life.