A Geography of Grace: Using the Circle of Trust® Approach for Small Group Ministry in Congregational Life

There is an eternal landscape, a geography of the soul; we search for its outlines all our lives.

-Josephine Hart

The Lay of the Land

Introduction: Setting Out on the Journey

The soul is generous: it takes in the needs of the world. The soul is wise: it suffers without shutting down. The soul is hopeful: it engages the world in ways that keep opening our hearts. The soul is creative: it finds its way between realities that might defeat us and fantasies that are mere escapes. All we need to do is to bring down the wall that separates us from our souls and deprives the world of the soul's regenerative powers.

-Parker J. Palmer, A Hidden Wholeness

Just as many of us are removed from contact with the natural world through urban living, or busy lives, so too we live distanced from the inner nature of our souls. These two landscapes have much in common and inform each other. The natural world desperately needs people who appreciate it, have reverence for it, listen to it, preserve, and restore it. With the same urgency, so does the soul need this kind of attunement and nurturance. Cut off from the land, we lose our sense of place, grounding, our sense of home and belonging on this earth; when we are out of touch with our souls our lives become barren, starved at the roots of what deeply animates us.

Since the language of the soul is metaphor, symbol and intuition, in circles of trust we use “third things” – poetry, stories, music and art – that hinge on the beauty of metaphor and serve the soul’s search for meaning. The metaphors from geography and nature offer images and archetypes which speak deeply of the inner life. They thus create a worthy map of the terrain one crosses when working together in circles of trust, an approach developed through the Center for Courage & Renewal and based on the pioneering work of Dr. Parker J. Palmer.

In addition to the focus on geography, the other theme for this program emerged as we began to write this guide: grace. The Latin word for grace is the same as the word for gratitude: grata or gratia, which means “a given gift.” In moments of grace, there is an awakening to the realization that everything has originated as a gift and blessing, and that grace is not earned, but given. It is
the nature of grace that it comes to you freely, yet, paradoxically, you can’t go after it either. Instead, through you, grace is passed on to others. Just as grace is abundant and often present, the landscape of the soul and her gifts are always available to be received and treasured, if we only stay receptive. Yet, just like grace, you can’t demand the soul to make an appearance. Many of us lack access to our own interiority due to inattention or a scarcity of places safe enough for this inner quest, even within our churches and spiritual communities.

The Circle of Trust® approach offers a container and process where we can rediscover the soul in its native landscape and begin to recover our natural wholeness. In a circle of trust, no one tries to change you or improve you. Instead, you can discover your unique inner geography with its imperfections, shadows, voice, and images; you begin to be present to who you already are. You are called back to the source of your originality and creativity, your identity and integrity. In the context of a congregation, this can be a refreshing and powerful approach to share in community. We believe this is what people are longing for yet uncertain how to create.

For this two-part series of small group, circles of trust, you are holding in your hands a map and compass for a landscape that opens the journey to vistas of the inner life. At times, this will include a group tour, where you share the views and scenery with others, what you observe and experience, and the stories you choose to tell about it in community. Since none of us can truly know ourselves completely without the aid and help of kindred spirits, your fellow travelers can provide valuable feedback and mirroring along the way. At other times, you will travel alone, looking close-up at the sacred places in your soul and the cartography of your life. To steer a course for a safe passage, there is not only this map, but also tools which will ensure that you are well equipped and able to find your way. The journey offers plenty of surprises and unplanned challenges that are essential to a pilgrimage. These tools, in the right hands and used skillfully, ensure that there are no dangerous excursions where someone gets hurt or becomes lost.

### Kinds of Landscapes

When we first begin to experience the Circle of Trust approach, it is like when you leave the distractions and intensity of a city and its traffic and enter a mountain forest road where one rolls down the window, takes a deep breath and inhales fresh, pine infused air; you immediately begin to slow down, look around, and explore the beauty and nature of the surroundings. The Circle of Trust approach invites us to get out of the car and walk off-road. Time slows. You can take off your work clothes and protective armor and experience a sense of fresh encounter with and hospitality towards your interior world.
In this guide, each session will provide a map for just one aspect of the landscape where explorers discover their own meaning, create their own pictures, and write their own travel log. There is much variety in the geography on this planet: the coastlines and deserts, the tundra and canyons, the jungles, forests and wetlands, and countless others. What all landscapes share in common are encounters with the weather, the play of light and shadow in the cycle of the days and seasons, the influence of what lives and grows on them, of erosion and time, and a vulnerability to human impact. These inner and outer landscapes often reflect patterns and paradoxes that offer nourishment to the spiritual imagination.

The geographical themes you will encounter in this program are:

I. Vista Points: Landscapes of the Soul
II. Spirit Guides for the Journey: Befriended by Grace
III. Holy Wells
IV. Boundaries: The Integrity of Bounded Space
V. Desert Places: Landscapes of Hope & Persistence
VI. Forest Community
VII. The Sea & Release
VIII. The Prairies & Their People
IX. Mountain Edges
X. Primal Wonder and the Night Sky: Longitudes and Latitudes of the Soul
XI. Soul Kitchens: Marshlands
XII. The Spiritual Imagination of Enclosures: Garden Spaces

Who Leads the Tour?

A circle of trust 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. Once they 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 invitation only, so that you can select people suited for this kind of leadership.

**Qualities Essential for Leadership using the Circle of Trust Approach**

The following considerations for leadership of this 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 his or her own inner work, integrating the principles and practices described in *A Hidden Wholeness* 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 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” her shadow and moving her 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.” 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 it 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 to spending time in nature are examples of practices that help sustain your center. Ask yourself, What practices work best for me in support of 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: Leadership in A Geography of Grace retreat and training does not qualify you to facilitate Circle of Trust® retreat 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 and Renewal prepared facilitators. If you are interested in deepening your work with the Circle of Trust® approach by becoming a facilitator, you may contact the Center for Courage & Renewal at our website http://www.couragerenewal.org/about/foundations.

The Compass
A compass is a small devise with a magnetized needle that automatically swings to north. If we are off-course, a compass helps us realign directionality.

In circles of trust, there is an unseen but vital compass of principles and values that underlie the actual practices. If a group is feeling off-course, it is wise to
return to these principles and consider how you may be losing your way. These principles are defined by the Center for Courage & Renewal.

**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–ors,” 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.

**How to Read the Compass**

The compass in a circle of trust is a solid base of practices that reflect the principles you just read about. The best evaluation of a circle of trust is to ask, “Is there trust in this group?” This seems obvious and perhaps simple-minded, but it is a sure way to quickly discern if you are on the right track. Of course, trust is earned, and it takes time to build in a group.

Below is a summary of the practices we use in a circle of trust to ensure that we know where true north is in community, and how to keep the group focused, bounded, meaningful, and safe.

**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 his or her own way.

• We use multiple modes of reflection so that everyone can find his or her place and pace: In circles of trust, 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.

The Map: The Lay of the Land for the Sessions

We seldom start out onto a new landscape without a guide or map to help us find our way, and since many of you are new to leading the circles of trust, we want to make sure that you have a map in hand for your journey.

The essential lay of the land that you will use in each session, as outlined in this guide, A Geography of Grace, follows the basic pattern defined below, and is designed to last 2 ½ hours:

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, followed by reading 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 insights, feelings, or questions about this session.
Grace Note

The grace note is a blessing or poem to be read aloud to the group before parting.

Suggestions for Practice or Further Discussion

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 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!

A Note on Timing: While these meetings are designed to last 2 ½ 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 container for your work together. If the group needs a break, you may choose where to fit one in between the segments.

The Touchstones: Water and Food for the Journey

As mentioned before, the Center for Courage & Renewal and its community of facilitators have developed a set of what we call “Touchstones” which name for the group how we agree to act in the circle. If followed faithfully, these touchstones are sustaining water and food for the journey.

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.

A Geography of Grace sample chapter. Learn more at www.couragerenewal.org/grace
• *What is offered in the circle is by invitation, not demand.* This is not 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 trust people to do their own sifting and winnowing.

• *No fixing, saving, advising, and 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 and making space for the inner teacher.

• *Learn to respond to others with honest, open 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 her to this belief?” “I wonder what he’s 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—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.

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 the participants to the Geography of Grace small group series, an evaluation form for the program, as well as some suggestions about how to introduce the program into your congregation.
Practical Tips for Bringing A Geography of Grace Into Community

The Circle of Trust® approach is a counter-cultural approach for small group ministry that is difficult to describe. In spiritual communities some may find that the approach is not biblical and therefore not appropriate; others may find that the investigation of the soul is counter to what is usually offered in adult learning communities and, therefore, of great interest. One essential is determining whether there is an opening in the community for transformation work or opportunities for deepening the spiritual journey.

Arrange a meeting with the pastor/leaders to talk about A Geography of Grace. Indicate that you would like to offer it to the community in two, six-week sessions, or one 12 week series. You might consider a series in the fall and one in the spring. Pay attention to how you describe this new approach in order to gain acceptance of the church staff and adult education director. Review the guide with the pastor/leaders and invite him/her/them to be a member of your initial program.

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

- a process to strengthen one's inner life in collaboration with others;
- inviting the soul into conversation through focused inquiry with specific guidelines;
- a place to engage in a powerful inquiry about the nature of one's life in a safe and caring context;
- deep engagement with the inner self through intentional listening and speaking;
- a way to receive clarity about yourself—your true self—and how it might thrive in the places you frequent, such as work, home, community and civic space;
- learning and practicing ways of being with each other that are very different from the problem solving, analytical, fast-paced world where 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 from members of A Geography of Grace.
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 for when the next Geography of Grace series forms.

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 of the circle of trust. If there is a desire for more informal socializing, you can meet first for a pot luck dinner before starting the formal meeting.

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 nearly two hundred facilitators in the U.S., Canada, and Australia, has created a unique retreat-based 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.

These retreats—rooted in the work of Parker J. Palmer, the Center's founder and Senior Partner—are now being offered to clergy and congregational leaders through a program funded in part by the Lilly Endowment, Inc.

Why Programs for Clergy and Congregational Leaders?

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.

Circles of Trust

Using an approach to spiritual formation called the Circles 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

• 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.
• Offer leaders a meaningful break from the demands of daily life, an opportunity to slow down and take a journey of regeneration.
• Focus on deep listening in community, to ourselves, to each other, and to that of God in every person.
• Create a soul-safe space for personal and communal discernment about questions of meaning and purpose, calling and ministry.
• Explore principles and practices that can help sustain spiritual and vocational vitality in individuals and congregations.
• 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.