

CHAPTER 3

Birthing Your Circle

I can't tell you how to find your heart. . . . Only you know where it is. No one can make the journey for you. Only you know the way back to your heart. But I can walk with you.

—The Quest of the Woman in Search of Her Heart

So you are ready to take the plunge and “conceive” your own women’s Christian spirituality group. Congratulations! This chapter will help you do just that. But know that it is not written as the expert guide to creating the ultimate group. Instead, we, as in many other new challenges of our life, are “making it up as we go along.” So trust your intuitive side and enter into this “pregnant” venture girded in prayer. Know that the Spirit is moving among you and your sisters in new ways.

* Midwife the Circle

First and foremost, *don't do it alone*. Find a friend to share the load. In this way, you can join your energies and creativity and bounce ideas off each other. Also, you can model the shared leadership that will later guide the group process. Besides, it is more fun to work on projects with a friend.

Once the group is established, your facilitating role will fade as others in the circle take ownership. In time, you will meld into an equal member alongside the others. So, if you are a person who needs to be in charge, make a deal with someone to give you cues when it is time to pull back. This will safeguard you from repeating old patterns that are unhealthy for you and unhelpful to sharing leadership.

*** Create Interest**

Begin by talking about the idea of a spirituality circle with friends. Although most women don't want to be the organizer of a group, many are willing to be part of a gathering and are grateful that someone else is organizing it.

Here are some ideas for finding women who might be interested:

- Start a new group or plug into meeting times of an already existing group.
- Put an announcement on the bulletin board at work, in the grocery store, or in a newsletter.
- Hold a get-together or party and send out invitations. (Read on for more details.)

- Call a few women and invite them to a first meeting or “Introductory Gathering.”
- Secure a meeting site at a church, library, or community room; print and distribute flyers, and see who shows.
- Spread the news by word of mouth. Most groups come together through relationships.

*** Extend the Invitation**

As suggested above, one effective way to begin your circle is to extend invitations to specific women. (Various sample invitations ready for you to adapt and use are found at the end of this chapter.) Make phone calls to check out interest levels. Invite women in a way that does not make them feel they must attend so that they do not hurt your feelings. And don't invite people because *you* feel obligated not to hurt *their* feelings.

Invite between six and twelve women—or a few more, if you like, to account for those who may opt out because it doesn't fit their current needs. Generally speaking, smaller groups offer more intimacy, and larger circles, chosen with care, yield greater diversity. Your group may even number over one hundred. In that case, you would divide into a

number of circles for activities that call for a smaller group setting, such as Sacred Story Bible Study.

A diverse group brings together women of varying ages and cultural backgrounds, both rich and poor, as well as women with divergent outlooks. Diversity can be your biggest strength as it stimulates ideas and understandings of the spiritual life.

*** Put It in God's Hands**

Prayerfully leave the final outcome of your group to God. In the end, trust that those who appear are the women who, in God's good will for each person's life, are to be there. Remember, once the circle becomes a reality, you are forming it not into *your* image, but *God's* image. Allow the group's relationships, dynamics, and processes to unfold as they will. Be open to the final composition of the group as well as to the fact that the circle will develop differently—and far more richly—than you ever imagined.

Finally, be realistic. Do not involve women who have deep emotional problems. Julia Cameron, in her book *The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity*, calls these people “crazymakers.” She writes: “Crazymakers are those personalities that create storm centers. . . . You know the

type: charismatic but out of control, long on problems and short on solutions. . . . Crazy-makers like drama” (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 2002, 44-45). I’m not saying these persons are not worthy of our time, but the circle setting may not be helpful for who they are. In the end, it would be unloving both for them and for the circle to place them in such a position. We would zap the energy of the group trying to deal with their overwhelming needs. (For more reflections on group and personality dynamics that might cause difficulties, see chapter 8.)

*** Check Out Assumptions**

Once your group has gathered, there are some decisions to be made. Don’t just assume that everyone is on the same wavelength. Each woman needs to clarify her assumptions and intentions at the start. Otherwise, down the road people will be disillusioned, anticipating one thing and getting something else.

To keep individuals from meeting at cross purposes, discuss what kind of group you want. Does your circle have a particular focus? Will your circle be an inward nucleus to do outward mission? Perhaps your circle is a mother’s-day-out group or a single women’s gathering with certain life-stage

needs. Is yours an “Artist’s Way” circle, with spiritual creativity being the hallmark of the group?

Of course, you have a few “musts” as a Christian spirituality circle. Your core purpose is to walk more closely with Jesus. It also is understood that your gatherings will have two essential components: prayer and Sacred Scripture.

So you see, it is important to check out assumptions. Here are some important issues for you to consider.

Where should we meet?

Most women’s groups I’ve worked with tell me that where they meet and how they arrange themselves to meet is very important. In her book *Ritualizing Women*, Lesley A. Northup points out that many groups gather in a domestic setting as a deliberate reaffirmation and sanctification of places that have been devalued and minimized in recent years due to the increasing number of women working outside the home. Indeed, women’s ritual horizontally expands the definition of the sacred into areas previously considered profane—the home, the workplace, and nature. In this horizontal zone, women locate the sacred. “Wherever women work, love, gather, dream, remember, and relate” in God’s name, we create sacred space (*Ritualizing Women*, 57).

Like the Samaritan woman learned from Jesus (John 4:1-42), wise women know that sacred space is not located solely in consecrated buildings or even on mountaintops. Worshiping women find the sacred in ordinary places—the kitchen, bathroom, or nursery, as well as the office, library, or factory. Nonchurch settings may be more comfortable for newcomers, especially if they aren't church-goers. Creating sacred space, then, is simply finding a place where we are comfortable to be ourselves—with one another and with God. You will want to give careful consideration not only to the setting you choose for your circle gatherings, but also to the environment you create within that setting. (For more on creating an inviting atmosphere, see chapter 4.)

Do we want open or closed membership?

You'll need to decide if your membership will be open or closed, and to what extent. Some, but not all, of your creative options include the following: (1) closing membership after the first few weeks; (2) adding a new member whenever someone leaves the group; (3) remaining open to new members as the Spirit leads; (4) opening your membership to new women during a predesignated time, perhaps in the fall.

Keep in mind that you are not an elite women's club, excluding others. You are a part of the Body of Christ. A core mission of your circle may be to reach out to other women to share what the group is discovering about God and about the worthiness of their own lives. The women's spirituality model is one of sharing talents, blessings, and works so that the community may be a place of healing and transformation for all women.

In the circles in which I have participated, welcoming new women into the circle has been essential to maintaining and sustaining the identity and health of the group. Your group also may want to look for ways to extend an open invitation to any and all women who might contribute to and benefit from your circle.

How do we introduce new members?

You will need to have a process for welcoming and introducing new members, especially if you choose to open the group once a year for new participants or to have open membership. Discern if the "fit" is right, both she for your group and you for her. You'll know. This is done not by vote but by mutual understanding and prayerful discernment. In this manner, the new member may enter and exit with grace. As women come and go from your

group, trust that they are making the choice that is best for their lives at that time. A woman's choice to leave is not a betrayal or a personal rejection of you or of the circle. Honor her choice.

It is important to say a word here about comfort levels. Some groups are rigorous in their pursuit of spiritual holiness. They give and receive—sometimes harshly—constructive feedback, centered in the commitment that each person is striving to live to her full potential in Christ. Because women have differing comfort levels, you will need to gauge for yourselves the level of intimacy your group is prepared to take on, and communicate this to prospective or new members.

How are meetings scheduled?

Do you plan to meet weekly, monthly, quarterly, or even semiannually? Your circle should decide what day(s) and time(s) best fit your collective needs and schedules. Ask yourselves, “How much time do we honestly have and are we ready to commit?”

Some groups use a multiple group format. This is similar to the meeting plans used successfully by support groups such as Weight Watchers and Alcoholics Anonymous. Here is how it works. Plan to hold more than one gathering or meeting for

each planned session or lesson. Participants then have the option of attending one of the numerous meetings scheduled each week, month, quarter, or so forth. This arrangement, which keeps groups from growing cliquish and encourages open membership, works particularly well in large congregations.

How much time do the meetings take?

In my experience, groups fill the time they have and leave important matters until last, no matter how much time is allotted. A great deal may be accomplished in thirty minutes, in sixty minutes, or in ninety minutes. Some groups may choose to meet for an entire evening. One group I know of meets for a full day each quarter. Another meets on Saturday mornings. Whatever your group decides, stick to your decision. Begin when you say you'll begin, and end when you say you'll end. If you run overtime, some members may need to leave before the closing. Staying on schedule helps everyone to be present from the opening until the closing of the meeting. Each member does her part by arriving on time and staying for the entire time. It is not fair to the others in the group if anyone regularly arrives late or leaves early. Even so, remember to live in grace for one another. There are always exceptions.

What if I miss some meetings?

We all have times in our lives when we cannot attend a meeting or event. We need to respect the demands of one another's lives and accept the fact that all of us have to make choices about what we can and cannot do at a given time. One circle made up of professional women who travel a great deal makes a special effort to welcome back those who miss gatherings. You, too, will want to find ways to help one another feel a part of the circle even when life's demands occasionally pull you away.

What about resources?

The resources you use will be determined by your circle's chosen focus or purpose, as well as by your particular needs or interests related to the essential components of prayer and Sacred Scripture, or Bible study. Lists of suggested books, music, and other resources are included in chapter 9. In addition to these kinds of resources, your group will need to consider what materials and equipment are necessary to create the desired meeting environment and atmosphere. Items for creating a worship center, for example, might include a candle, a small table and cloth cover or

scarf, and any other objects or symbols that have meaning for the circle. All of the resources and materials may be kept in a central location or assigned room.

You may designate one person to acquire all the necessary resources and materials, and to assure that the resources are on hand for each circle gathering. Or, if you prefer, you may rotate this responsibility among circle members. You'll want to make the arrangements that best suit your group's unique situation.

What about food?

Food is an important issue for many women. Just ask them! Don't take the issue of food lightly. It's serious business. The decision whether or not to have food at your gatherings is entirely up to you.

Some circles show hospitality by serving refreshments as the women arrive or as they visit with one another at the end of the gathering. One group stopped having refreshments when it became a competition. The first week, a woman brought a home-baked cheesecake. From then on, the designated "hostess" felt pressured into playing the game "Can you top this?" The circle finally saw the monster they had created and stopped bringing

food completely. They knew they wouldn't starve in one hour.

Another group has the guideline that only fresh fruit and veggies, or some other nutritious, energy-boosting food, may be served. Still another circle decided that all goodies must be store-bought. In other circles, some women decide to go out for coffee or a meal *after* the gathering.

I find it best to eliminate food altogether from the circle gathering. I don't need the temptation. And besides, who has time to remember to pick something up from the bakery? Here's the bottom line: whatever you decide, try it for a while and then evaluate your decision. Your preferences may change as your group develops.

What about children?

There are a number of creative options for welcoming mothers and their children into the circle. First of all, make mothers with children feel welcome. View children's interruptions as part of the weave of the gathering. There are many ways to do this. Be sure to childproof the location. Designate a particular gathering at which children are especially welcome, or at which childcare is provided. Or you may choose to provide childcare at every gathering. Some groups find a volunteer to care for

the children at the site or in her own home. If childcare outside of the meeting is preferred, consider collecting dues to pay for a caretaker.

Whatever arrangements you make, remember that childcare is the responsibility of the entire community. Share any expenses. If children are accommodated, mothers with children will attend.

*** Questions for Reflection and Action**

1. What kind of group do you want to be a part of? What characteristic or component is an absolute for you? What is not critical?
2. What kind of commitment are you able and willing to make? Six weeks, six months, a year, or more?
3. Are you open to diverse understandings of the Christian tradition, or do you expect circle members to have similar perspectives? Why do you think you feel this way?
4. Finally, make a list of women you might invite to be part of a group, decide how you'll contact them, and get started. Seize the day!

* **Sample Information Sheets, Invitations, and Announcements**

Because you are a busy person, I know you will appreciate practical help for getting your group up and running. Following are six sure-fire samples you may use as is or adapt: (1) a single sheet hand-out to distribute to friends, (2) an announcement for a platform presentation, (3) a letter of invitation, (4) an announcement for a bulletin or newsletter, (5) an invitation to a circle gathering, (6) an announcement brochure.

INFORMATION HANDOUT

This handout gives a quick overview of a spirituality circle to those who want to know more. Use the handout at your initial meeting, or distribute copies to women who show interest.

CIRCLE OF HEARTS

A Time Apart for Women

A Circle of Hearts is a time for women to:

- Come together in a relaxed time

How to Start and Sustain a Faith-Based Women's Spirituality Group

- Share their stories
- Sort out their lives
- Reassess God's will

Each gathering includes:

- Prayer rituals that touch your soul and help you find your identity
- Sacred Scriptures that move your heart and change your life
- Conversations in which you identify your concerns and cares
- Thoughts that help you see more clearly who you are and where you are going
- Spiritual disciplines such as keeping a journal, practicing relaxation exercises, praying, and claiming quiet times

You will leave with:

- Friends who support but do not meddle
- A deeper experience of God
- Down-to-earth practices to carry with you and enliven your daily life

PLATFORM PRESENTATION ANOUNCEMENT

When this announcement is made, have in place a display table staffed with someone who is ready to answer questions and register women as they leave the assembly. Have samples of the materials and resources you plan to use available for browsers. This platform presentation can be used during worship announcement times, coffee hours, or luncheons. You also might use this presentation in conjunction with a sample or introductory circle gathering.

Good morning. I am *(your name)*. I have been a member of this *(congregation/organization)* for *(number of years)*. I have *(tell about your family, such as: "A four-year-old daughter, Lauren")*.

I want to tell you about a special, new spiritual growth group for women that we are starting here at *(name of congregation/organization)*. It is called Circle of Hearts.

As you may have read in the bulletin *(or newsletter)*, Circle of Hearts is an ongoing program in which women come together to pray, study Sacred Stories *(hold up the Bible)*, and share concerns that affect our lives.

There are three heart-stirring things about the circle that I look forward to. First *(hold up one finger)*, I'll have a chance to talk with other women about the strain of being a woman. Some of us jug-

gle kids, home, and work. Still other women go to school full time. Others of us are single, married, widowed, or divorced. This program invites women of all stages of life to meet in a relaxed, comfortable way.

Second (*hold up two fingers*), I'll be able to step back and get a new perspective about what I'm doing with the precious little time I do have, and then begin to make decisions about how I *really* want to live.

Third (*hold up three fingers*), I'll be able to be myself, to learn about myself, and to grow spiritually. I will discover how being *me* is a special ministry to others.

With (*name of committee chair, sponsoring group, or pastor*), we are holding an open introductory gathering on (*day and time*). We will meet in the (*location of building and room*). I invite you to register for this introductory meeting. Please register today so that we may plan for the number who will be coming. You may also bring a friend by calling the number in the bulletin. Childcare will be available.

Please pray that this new ministry will grow and bless our entire (*church/organization*). There is further information at the display in the (*location*) where you may register as you leave today. We hope you'll join in the circle.

INVITATION LETTER

Send this letter to prospective women participants. The letter invites women to an introductory meeting where they may decide if the circle is right for them. Adapt it to fit your particular situation.

Date

Dear *(name)*,

Do you feel as though your life has become too hectic? If you are like me, you need to remind yourself to: Stop.

Look around.

And remember; this is the good stuff.

I invite you to be a part of an exciting new spiritual growth group for women. It is called Circle of Hearts. Circle Hearts is an ongoing program in which you will come together with other women to pray, read Sacred Stories, and share concerns that affect your lives. There are three reasons to take time now to attend the circle:

- First, let's face it: it's hard being a woman. Some of us juggle kids, home, and work. Other women go to school full time. Still others of us are single, married, widowed, or divorced. This program is for all women to meet in a relaxed, comfortable way and look at our strains and joys together.

- Second, you'll have the chance to step back and get a new perspective about what you are doing with the precious little time you do have. You'll get a chance to make decisions about how you really want to live your life.

- Third, you'll be able to be yourself, learn about yourself, and grow spiritually. You'll discover how being *you* is a real blessing to others.

A thirty-minute (*or sixty-minute*) open introductory meeting is being held on (*day and date*) at (*time*). We will meet in the (*location of building and room*). If you get a chance, please give the planners a call or e-mail so they may plan for the approximate number attending. Here are their names and numbers (*contacts' names and telephone numbers or e-mail addresses*). If you don't get a chance to call, come anyway, and bring a friend or neighbor. Childcare will be available.

Don't say you can't do one more thing. Come find out if this is the answer for you. **Circle of Hearts may be one of the most important things you can**

do for yourself and your spiritual health. We hope you'll come.

Blessings,

(name and signature)

**BULLETIN AND NEWSLETTER
ANNOUNCEMENT**

CIRCLE OF HEARTS

A Time Apart for Women

Circle of Hearts is a program that invites women to come together in a relaxed way to share their stories, sort out their lives, and reassess God's will. Each meeting includes prayer rituals that touch the soul, Scriptures that enliven daily life, and thoughts that help you see more clearly who you are and where you are going. You will leave with friends who support but do not meddle, a deeper experience of God, and down-to-earth practices to carry with you.

A thirty-minute *(or sixty-minute)* open introductory meeting *(or initial meeting)* is being held on *(day and date)* at *(time)*. We will meet in the *(location of building and room)*. If you get a chance, give

the planners a call or e-mail so they may plan for the approximate number attending. Here are their names and numbers: (*contacts' names and telephone numbers or e-mail addresses*). If you don't get a chance to call, come anyway, and bring a friend or neighbor. Childcare will be available.

CIRCLE GATHERING INVITATION

This invitation also may be adapted and used for an introductory or initial circle gathering. It is written for multiple group circle gatherings. See page 00 for a review of the multiple group format. You may adapt it to meet your particular needs.

CIRCLE OF HEARTS

Come with us on a journey to the Heart

You are invited to Circle of Hearts

Circle of Hearts is a creative, ongoing program that will help you grow spiritually. It is a gentle program of self-awareness and an awakening to the spirituality of women. You will have the opportunity to clarify your values, claim your giftedness, and enjoy genuine community.

Both thirty-minute and sixty-minute programs are forming. You may attend the gathering that best suits your schedule. The dates, times, and locations are listed here. Please sign up so that adequate resources and childcare may be available.

Date: *(day and date)*

Place: *(location)*

Time: *(times you will begin and finish)*

Cost: *(insert cost here)* per person

RSVP: *(insert telephone number)* Please reply as soon as possible. Let us know if you need any assistance to attend. We want you to be part of a Circle of Hearts.

BROCHURE

Make an attractive brochure for distribution. This sample promotes the multiple group format. You will want to reword it to fit your particular needs.

CIRCLE OF HEARTS

Circle of Hearts is the name given to an innovative program designed to help women grow spiritually. Created over coffee at a kitchen table, it is now spreading across the nation. Circle of Hearts successfully brings about a sense of belonging, hospitality, faith-sharing, and genuine community to women.

The purpose of Circle of Hearts is to lead you and a group of women meeting with you to greater self-awareness and to awaken you to God's Spirit in your lives while teaching you new ways to inspire, encourage, and affirm one another. Through this process of spiritual growth, you have the opportunity to clarify your values, claim your own giftedness, and return these new strengths to your family relationships and to the larger community.

The circle begins with a twelve-week journey (if you are beginning by using the resources *Heart to Heart Guidebook: A Spiritual Journey for Women* and *From the Heart Journal*) that leads your group through an experience of peer ministry, self-discovery, mutual support, and prayer. You will share your stories and bond by gaining insight into your current missions in the world. You also will experience an important element missing from many of today's churches: hospitality.

A Personal Prayer Journal

Explore the dynamics of discipleship as they apply to you: self-acceptance, stress, spirituality, feelings, personal growth, and friendships. Your journal guides you in reflecting on your experiences, preparing you to share your story, and helping you to realize the sacredness of your call. Journals can be formal or informal, guided or free form; they can be filled with poems and drawings as well as thoughts and reflections. Choose the style of journal that is right for you. You may use your journal independently at home and/or as part of sharing and discussion in the circle.

Circle of Hearts is a time for you to:

- Come together with other women in a relaxed time
- Share your stories
- Sort out your lives
- Reassess God's will

Each meeting includes:

- Prayer rituals that touch the soul
- Scriptures that enliven your daily life
- Thoughts that help you see more clearly who you are and where you are going

You will leave with:

- Friends who support but don't meddle
- A deeper experience of God
- Down-to-earth practices to carry with you

Circle of Hearts is sponsored by *(name of the sponsoring organization)*.

You won't spend long hours getting ready for the lesson. Circle of Hearts understands the busy woman's schedule. Each person attends as a guest.

No one woman is a designated teacher or leader. Instead, you work as a whole. Just as women gather in a kitchen pulling together a meal or work with a team to accomplish a goal, each woman does her part in a way that fits who she is.

Frequently Asked Questions

* Where will we meet?

Anywhere two or three are gathered. It can be in a kitchen, church, home, restaurant, library, or work break room. Anywhere women are comfortable.

* How long is a gathering?

You can be in and out in thirty- or sixty-minutes *(state your designated time)*. Your circle is designed so that you have the option of either a thirty- or

sixty-minute gathering *(or whatever time you have decided)*. Either way, you leave renewed and ready to face the world again.

* How do we keep track of one another?

A sign-in sheet is kept. Mark the sheet upon arriving.