



*Christina with the group in Melbourne, Australia. (Photo courtesy PeerSpirit, Inc.)*

## Why circle is the core group process for emerging participatory leadership

*By Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea*

We are in charge of how we meet together. Chairs and tables do not have to be bolted to the floor in long rows facing a speaker's platform. The voice of upper management is not the only voice with power. If our current ways of meeting, interacting, speaking, listening, and decision-making are not working, we can claim another form of interaction.

Since the early 1990s, we have developed and practiced an alternative infrastructure for collaborative conversations that calls on long-held principles and practices of circle. We named this process PeerSpirit Circle—"peer," because every member of a circle shares responsibility and leadership, regardless of their position or social

status outside the circle; and "spirit" because putting purpose in the centre invites emergent wisdom and action that rises directly from collective synergy.

As author Margaret Wheatley writes in the preface to our book, "In today's world, dozens, if not hundreds, of group processes are available. In the midst of so much choice, it's important to remember the long lineage of circle and its role in human community. Circle process is not a technique; it's a heritage."

Through circle, and other circle-based collaborative conversation modalities, people are remembering ways to reattach to this heritage. We teach circle as a foundational practice that is

also embedded in World Café, Pro Action Café, Open Space, Dialogue, and other hosting methodologies.

For two decades we have brought the use of PeerSpirit Circle Process to individuals, organizations, corporations, churches and other religious institutions, government agencies, health care systems, university faculties and student bodies. Through reading our books and experiencing our seminars, managers, teachers, consultants, and facilitators have added circle to their repertoires of effective group process tools.

### Returning to Europe

From our home base near Seattle, Washington, we have taught and consulted across the United States and Canada, Europe, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand. We are returning to Germany and Belgium this September to train more circle facilitators within a growing movement of collaborative conversation.

One of the stories highlighted in our book, *The Circle Way*, is about a facilitator who attended one of our 2008 trainings and used his learning to tackle a challenge back in his home in Nova Scotia, Canada. For several years, residents of a small agricultural village near Halifax had struggled with whether an abandoned rail line, which had been converted into a trail that ran through the community, should be open to use by motorized vehicles.

Many residents were opposed, believing that community tranquility was better served by preserving a path for bicycling, walking, and skiing. Others favored motorized use by all terrain vehicles (ATVs) and snowmobilers whose drivers wanted to access hundreds of kilometers of interconnected trails. The issue had created a palpable community rift.

Jim Neale, a public policy consultant, was asked by the department of natural resources to develop a process for conversations that would ideally produce a consensus view for trail use and begin social healing. He started consulting with community representatives to establish their fundamental and common intentions and discovered a clear desire for a strong and united community, honoring its long tradition of neighbors helping neighbors.

Jim designed a series of three circles, one for each of the three primary special-interest groups: landowners, hikers, and motorized vehicle users. In the preparatory circles Jim established a centre that reflected the shared vision for the community as a friendly town.

Then he led people into practicing clear statements and neutral language so that they would be confident in their ability to maintain focus and make their point in the midst of whatever energies were swirling in the all-community meeting. Jim would serve as the host and guardian of the circle and enforce the etiquette of circle process. One of his skills was his ability to coach each of the polarized interest groups and offer each of them a sense that they had his support for making positive contributions to the conversation.

### Compelling compromise

Then came the open circle for all interested community members. One of the participants, an elderly woman with terminal cancer, lived very close to the trail. The quieter environment needed for her care appeared incompatible with motorized use. "Many residents had become involved in this issue to protect her right to live in a health-preserving setting," Jim said.

"As this woman told her story, it became clear that the rift in the community was also a cause of pain for her and that her deepest wish was to see reconciliation and healing. She surprised everyone by announcing that for that



*The circle group in Melbourne, Australia. (Photo courtesy PeerSpirit, Inc.)*



reason, she was going to support reopening the trail to vehicles.

“She offered a clear and present challenge to the circle that compelled compromise and creativity. It was a magnificent breakthrough moment. Participants reframed the trail as a community commons—shared land. Closing the trail to motorized use had prevented members of the community from using a village commons and was therefore inconsistent with the vision they held of a united community. Opening the trail became the only acceptable conclusion.”

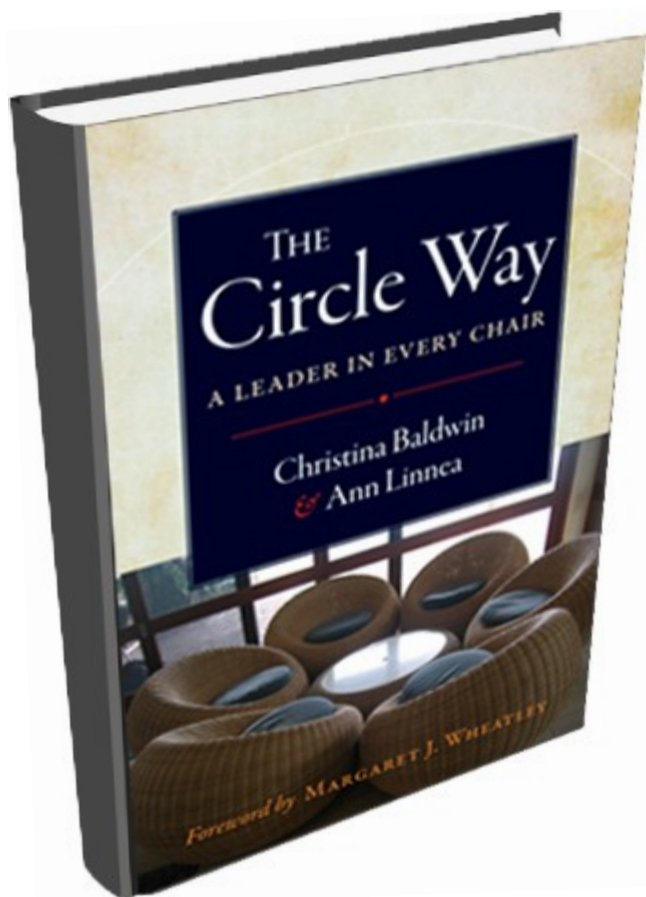
Several actions set the modern circle in motion. Participants are called by an invitation that clarifies the intention. A circle host welcomes people, followed by a round of check-in so that every voice is heard. People respect agreements that define how individuals treat each other. Topic and intention guide the conversation and action.

To elicit story and wisdom, practices of listening and speaking are observed. Besides the host, the circle employs a volunteer guardian who watches over timeliness, energy, and from time

to time pauses the action and offers space for brief reflection. Before people leave, the group conducts a round of harvested insights or action points.

Jim reported, “The circle went exceptionally well—like nothing the residents (or I) had experienced before when addressing divisive issues within a small, close, and very conservative community. A strong consensus view emerged that included better understandings, beginnings of real forgiveness, a fresh faith that they could work together, and acceptance of the need to move forward even when some people were disappointed. Circle provided an extremely powerful process to reinforce basic community values.”

Stories such as this one illustrate the power of PeerSpirit Circle Process, and its cross-cultural adaptability. We look forward to our return to Europe and the chance to introduce and deepen these practices.



#### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea are the authors of *The Circle Way, A Leader in Every Chair* (Berrett-Koehler, 2010) and co-founders of PeerSpirit Circle Process ([www.peerspirit.com](http://www.peerspirit.com)). From their home base in the USA, they have taught and consulted across the United States and Canada, Europe, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand. They will be in Germany and Belgium this September to provide another training for circle facilitators.

PeerSpirit’s ‘Basic Circle Guidelines’ is available as a free download in six languages. To register for their upcoming seminars, contact [www.peerspirit.com](http://www.peerspirit.com) or the authors at [cbaldwin@peerspirit.com](mailto:cbaldwin@peerspirit.com) & [linnea@peerspirit.com](mailto:linnea@peerspirit.com).