



WISDOM WAYPOINTS

# Starting a Local Wisdom Circle



An Experience Guide & Resources  
by Wisdom Waypoints

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## Overview

Welcome to our Wisdom Waypoints Experience Guide for starting a local Wisdom Circle. Whether you are preparing for an upcoming gathering or just considering the idea of initiating a group, our aim is that this Experience Guide will be a helpful resource, grounding you in the elements of a Wisdom Circle and providing support as you step into your leadership post.

In this guide, we will begin with an overview of what a Wisdom Circle is and then offer practical guidance and components for getting started—including a suggested outline for your Wisdom Circle’s time together. Finally, we will address some common questions and provide resources for learning more.

We are grateful you are taking up the vital work of integrating this Wisdom lineage into your local community. Wisdom moves as a living stream, flowing with creativity and new dynamism in every iteration. We hope this Experience Guide will offer you useful starting ideas, while knowing you will make it intimately your own.

Warmly,  
Wisdom Waypoints



# Introduction

## What Is a Wisdom Circle?

In *The Wisdom Way of Knowing*, Cynthia Bourgeault frames her introduction of the Wisdom path by recalling the unique rhythm of one of her first Wisdom Schools in Maine. Across the week, participants were involved in a cadence that was steady, yet never rushed, moving consciously from one activity to the next, with intention and a sense of growing presence—both in the silence and in their shared moments. Cynthia understood that in this approach the inner conditions had been created for participants to taste Wisdom as "knowing deeper, not knowing more."

Perhaps you too have attended a Wisdom School and can reflect on that quiet yet alert presence and energetic aliveness permeating the experience? While a Wisdom Circle is a much shorter duration than a week-long school, with intention, Wisdom gatherings can replicate the same field which allows our heart to know Wisdom and perceive wholeness. Within our humble Wisdom Circles, we can learn to perceive the subtle networks of connection linking us to each other, all life, and the entire Ray of Creation.

## Why Are Wisdom Circles Vital?

G.I. Gurdjieff used to say that "without a group nothing is possible." And, while Cynthia heartily encourages us to begin where we are, as we are—even and especially if that means alone—it is also true that the energetic amplification of a group can be very useful on our spiritual journey. Together, we can intensify the quality of our work, generating a palpable shared presence and interconnectedness while increasing our reception to the higher realms. These distinct spiritual fruits offer nourishment not only to your Wisdom Circle participants but to your community and the entire planet.



# Practical Elements

## Wisdom Circle Basics

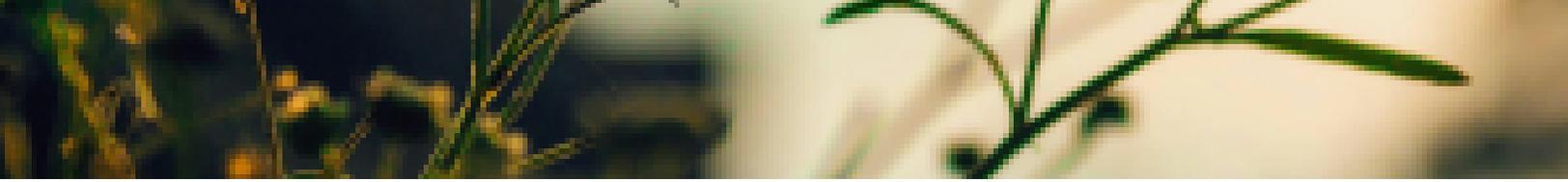
Wisdom Circles typically meet for between 90-minutes and up to two hours. You will want to create a quiet meeting space and determine a regular meeting time and cadence (weekly, every other week, or once a month).

The group can include as few or as many participants as you would like, but a good target might be six to eight members to begin. One person can be designated as the group leader or convener, or you can rotate leadership for each meeting or for periods of time.

Most groups pick a theme, teaching, or text to work with for a finite season which offers a dedicated focus for the Wisdom Circle. Examples might include *The Gospel of Thomas* or *The Wisdom Way of Knowing*. You may choose to decide the theme and offer a finished concept to your community or you might explore a topic collectively and decide together with your quorum of gathered seekers.

## Core Elements of a Wisdom Circle

While the duration and flow of Wisdom Circles will vary, a central aim is to shift into Three-Centered Awareness and presence using foundational tools such as Centering Prayer (or other mediation or silence), Sacred Chanting, Lectio Divina (sacred reading), and the essence of Ora et Labora (or prayer and work, a rhythm founded in the Benedictine tradition) in which participants engage both shared and solo activities with conscious attention and care.



## Suggested Flow

Below is a suggested flow for a two-hour Wisdom Circle showing how the core elements come together. Remember, this is just a starting template to make your own. Links to content ideas for the Wisdom Circle can be found in the Resources section of this guide.

### **30 minutes | Welcome and Three-Centered Practice**

To open, you might ring a singing bowl and/or light a candle to create a sacred space. Offer a brief leader introduction and a welcome to the gathered group.

Begin with one to three practices to cultivate Three-Centered Awareness. While it may feel odd not to start with group introductions, trust that there will be time to make those connections once the “DO” for the gathering has been struck. Three-Centered Awareness practices might include:

Grounding in the body with a body prayer, body scan, or brief relaxation

Sharing an opening chant

Deepening with a short Centering Prayer or silent meditation

### **15–30 minutes | Community Building**

As participants settle into a Wisdom rhythm, open a time for brief introductions by going around the circle and inviting each person to offer: ‘What drew you here?’ or ‘What are you longing for?’

### **30 minutes | Wisdom Theme**

Re-introduce your theme or teaching and then share it with the group (such as a video clip or a short excerpt from a book). Allow space for an overview of the theme and then a full group discussion. Be mindful of returning to Three-Centered Awareness as you explore the theme by encouraging silence between comments or pausing to connect with your breath or feet.



## Suggested Flow

### **25 minutes | Deepening and Sharing**

You might decide to deepen the container in one of two ways, either by shifting into small groups for conscious conversation on the theme or by practicing Lectio Divina on a Gospel of Thomas logion.

If breaking into small groups (approximately three to four people) for a theme conversation, it may be helpful to offer sharing guidelines around speaking mindfully and active listening (see Resources for Recommendations). Supplying the small groups with reflection questions on the theme can be useful for fostering dialogue. If trying a Lectio Divina, see the Resources section for a supplemental Lectio Divina mini flow.

For either deepening activity, leave enough time (approximately 10 minutes) to regather in the larger group and share reflections.

### **5 minutes | Closing**

To bring the Wisdom Circle to a close, initiate a time for gathering the graces. You might have everyone share a word or phrase from their experience, something that really made an impression, or something they are leaving with.

If there is a reminder of what to focus on until next time, such as an Inner Task or a next reading, offer it now. And finally, leave space for a sealing moment of silence, a chant, or reading. Conclude with three chimes to mark the end of the gathering

### **End on time**



## Resources | Overall Recommendations

- Aim to create a safe, supportive, and confidential environment (what is talked about in the group stays in the group).
- Take time to settle into the sacred space and the collective intention of your group. Trust that the Divine presence will become known.
- If you are using listening and speaking guidelines, you may find it helpful to read these each time at the beginning of the meeting or before a discussion period.
- Encourage people to be open and curious about what is unfolding in the group.
- Listen to others with your entire self (senses, feelings, intuition, and rational faculties).
- Speak for yourself only, expressing your own thoughts and feelings, referring to your own experience.
- Avoid veering into overly theoretical or intellectual conversation.
- Do not challenge what others say if you're not in agreement, but instead expand or build on what has already been spoken.
- Speak from your heart as your thoughts and words emerge in the moment, as opposed to 'rehearsing' in your mind what you plan to say.
- Pause between speakers to absorb what has been said, and do not interrupt another speaker.
- Listen to the group as a whole, to those who have not spoken verbally as well as to those who have; generally, if you have already spoken, leave space for anyone who may want to speak a first time before speaking a second time.
- Leaders and group participants can increase the interaction and meaningful conversation in the group by asking thoughtful, open-ended questions.
- As a leader, notice when you are in a state of bracing or grasping. It may help to pause and reconnect with your heartbeat, your breath, your feet, your torso, and then return to a simple hand gesture of opening and closing, giving and receiving, being with what is.
- Similarly, you can center the group at any time, as needed, by suggesting a moment of opening and closing the hands, feeling the sensations of grasping and letting go.
- Consider downloading an app for your phone that includes meditation timer bells such as Insight Timer or the Centering Prayer app from Contemplative Outreach.



## Resources | Group Dynamics

All groups take on their own personality and energy. As a leader and as a group participant try to attune to the group and align with its energy, building rapport and trust. You might do this by:

- Warmly greeting each person when they enter the room or Zoom room.
- Calling on everyone by name.
- Remembering key issues and concerns as they are shared and referring back to them throughout the time together. This helps group members know they are being listened to with an open heart and mind.
- Using feedback appropriately. For example, if it feels natural in your group, then thank each person for their sharing. You can also acknowledge a speaker for their insight or vulnerability or authenticity after a powerful sharing, or ask a participant if they would repeat something important that he or she just shared for even greater emphasis.
- Actively listening by focusing completely on what the participant is saying, and as seems appropriate repeat back what was heard for clarity.

Here are a few suggestions for handling special situations within the group dynamic:

### The overly chatty person

- Affirm that you “hear” them and are listening by reflecting back or summarizing what they are saying and then move on.
- Don’t look at this person when asking an open question to the group.
- Thank the person for their positive contribution, and then ask for others to share.

### The quiet person

- Watch for signs that the person wants to participate, and engage them at that time.
- Respect their desire to not share much, but trust they may be benefiting from the group and the sessions despite their silence.
- Connect with them before or after the meeting to help them feel welcome and included. Perhaps engaging them in one-on-one conversation will help build their comfort or confidence to speak more freely in the group.



## Resources | Wisdom Content

To prepare for leading a Wisdom Circle, we highly recommend beginning with Cynthia Bourgeault's *The Wisdom Way of Knowing* which offers an accessible foundation for walking this Wisdom path. This is an invaluable text for gaining comfort in facilitating a Wisdom Circle. Additional books that would be highly useful include *The Wisdom Jesus*, *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening*, and *Chanting the Psalms*.

In this section of the Resources, we will include a brief overview on several key Wisdom Circle elements while suggesting additional resources for discovery.

### **Three-Centered Awareness | Overview**

This foundational teaching introduces three centers of human intelligence: moving (embodied wisdom through sensation), intellectual (cognitive analysis), and emotional (feeling and sympathetic resonance). Western culture over-develops the intellectual center while neglecting the others, yet true awakening requires conscious engagement of all three centers together. Through simple practices like attending to one's feet, we can experience how attention is energy that can enliven different aspects of our being, leading to genuine "awakeness" rather than automated single-centered functioning.

The Wisdom path makes use of an ancient body of knowledge about the physiology of spiritual transformation and a methodology for increasing our receptivity to higher meaning. To awaken and transform we must activate all three centers, bringing them 'online.' In fact the notion of 'sleep,' as opposed to conscious awakening, is an indication of finding yourself in one center only. The three centers working in harmony is a prerequisite for Wisdom knowing, allowing a higher consciousness and presence to become available.

These three centers of intelligence serve as the foundational elements on which both individual and small group practices and experiences are built. Paying attention to each center and weaving in opportunities to connect with all centers helps cultivate Three-Centered Awareness. For more on this topic, see Chapter 3 of *The Wisdom Way of Knowing*.



# Resources | Wisdom Content

## Three-Centered Awareness | Moving Center Practices

### Body Prayer & Exercises

Wisdom Circles continually return to the body, employing embodied practice and gesture to activate the moving center. You might explore the [Here I Am](#) prayer or the [Atmosphere Exercise](#) with your group. A full library of Moving Center Practices can be found in the [Wisdom Waypoints library here](#).

### Lectio Divina

Lectio Divina can be practiced in a variety of ways, but one approach is to focus in on sensation and use this as a Moving Center Practice. Lectio Divina can be done with any short section of a sacred text and many Wisdom groups begin by using The Gospel of Thomas. Here is suggested prompt which emphasizes Lectio Divina as a Moving Center Practice:

- Start by slowly reading a passage aloud and listen for sensation: how does this text land in you; where in your body do you sense this text; in your heart, in your gut, perhaps in a tingling of your hands?
- You might notice that a word draws you. Tune into your body and see if you might be able to 'sense' what this word feels like in your body, in sensation. It is OK if you are not sure. This takes practice. We are experimenting and growing together.

While this can feel like a very different way of listening, invite your group to try to be at ease. We typically listen with and through our head, yet in reality this is the slowest center. Listening for and through sensation taps into the movement center and invites this center online allowing the body to share truths that the heart may not be able to yet access.



# Resources | Wisdom Content

## Three-Centered Awareness | Emotional Center Practices

### Sacred Chanting

Sacred Chanting wakes up the emotional center with sound and can deepen the connectivity of the group. Try familiar Taizé chants—freely available to listen and follow online. There is also a growing body of Wisdom chants which can be [explored in Wisdom Waypoints' chant library](#). As a suggestion, you might try [Be Right Here](#) by Henry Schoenfield or [We Swim in Mercy](#) by Susan Latimer.

### Lectio Divina

In this section, we offer an alternate flow of Lectio Divina which emphasizes the Emotional Center:

- Start slowly reading a passage aloud, and allow yourself to be drawn to a sentence, a phrase, or even a single word that seems to attract your attention.
- Read the passage again slowly, quietly allowing your faculties (your reason, your imagination, or emotions) to begin to work with this passage. This is about a “heart to heart” encounter with the text. It will be different every time.
- Read the passage a final time, resting in the sacred presence, and in deep receptivity with the experience. Some groups may decide to include a period of centering prayer at this stage, as an alternative to meditating before or after the Lectio.
- As you feel complete with the first three steps, take turns sharing what you noticed or what became alive for you or impacted you from the passage.



# Resources | Wisdom Content

## Three-Centered Awareness | Intellectual Center Practices

Consider what material or area of interest might provide fruitful exploration for your group as a collective Wisdom Teaching. Some suggestions are:

- Discussing parts or chapters from Cynthia's books, or books or readings from other Wisdom writers.
- Wisdom themes such as Three-Centered Awareness, Identification, Self Observation, Presence.
- Working with one or a few Gospel of Thomas logions (passages) for discussion. The Gospel of Thomas includes 114 authentic early Christian wisdom sayings that function like koans, designed to jolt readers beyond intellectual understanding into Three-Centered Awareness.
- Several recommended versions of The Gospel of Thomas are:
  - [The Gospel of Thomas: The Hidden Sayings of Jesus](#) by Marvin Meyer
  - [The Gospel of Thomas: The Gnostic Wisdom of Jesus](#) by Jean Yves LeLoup
  - [The Luminous Gospels: Thomas, Mary Magdalene, and Philip](#) by Lynn Bauman, Ward Bauman, and Cynthia Bourgeault



## Resources | Wisdom Content

### Meditation and Centering Prayer | Overview

Meditation is one of the most ancient and universal spiritual practices. The immediate purpose of meditation is to break the bonds of our usual mind with its constant thought stream and attention-grabbing habits. The long term and more powerful purpose is creating space for open receptivity and availability to divine presence and a direct experience of God. Meditation is a practice that keeps us in touch with our inner wellspring, fully conscious and present in daily life.

Centering Prayer is a practice of intention, where we set aside a time (usually 20-30 minute periods) to be still enough to open to the reality of God's presence. We start with being present in the here and now, in our bodies, and in physical sensation.

The core of the practice, as Cynthia suggests in *Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening*, is that as soon as a thought emerges into consciousness, one simply lets it go, removing attention from the thought. The power of this method is in the gesture of inner release. During the practice we learn to resist no thought, retain no thought, and react to no thought.

Centering Prayer patterns into our body and being the gesture of surrender, which is the most powerful and direct way known to awaken the Heart. Our intention is a commitment to ourselves and to God to gently release thoughts, emotions, plans (whatever is clamoring for our attention) into the Silence, the deep mystery of God.

As Cynthia says, "It's like putting a stick in the spoke of thinking, so that the whole closed circuit of ordinary thinking gets derailed." As we consent and surrender our 'small mind' and yield ourselves into the infinite field of presence, we exercise the 'muscle' of letting go, and letting be, again and again. In that repeated process over time we are practicing a shift to seeing and perceiving with our spiritual awareness, from another place inside ourselves where we know that all is held in Divine Mercy.



## Resources | Wisdom Content

### Resources for Centering Prayer

- [An Introduction to Centering Prayer](#) – short video by Cynthia Bourgeault
- [A Brief Teaching on Centering Prayer](#) – short video by Cynthia Bourgeault
- [The Heart of Centering Prayer](#) by Cynthia Bourgeault
- [Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening](#) by Cynthia Bourgeault
- [Into the Silent Land](#) by Martin Laird
- [The Path of Centering Prayer](#) by David Frenette