



Wisdom Circle Guide

The Sage-ing Journey

Chuck Warren & Del Jones

3rd Edition

July, 2016

Sage-ing International: www.sage-ing.org

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“I was beginning to think I was invisible... until I went to a Sage-ing® program”

Rose (84 year old participant)

Introduction

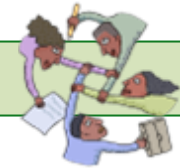
Sage-ing® International (SI) has encouraged the formation of Wisdom Circles (sometimes called Elder Circles or Salons) for a number of years as an effective way to create meaningful Community for our Sage-ing members and friends in the second half of life. Additionally, Wisdom Circles provide significant Education opportunities for participants through their facilitated discussions of topics of interest to elders. Finally, Wisdom Circles are a Service to our local community and to those who participate. Thus, Wisdom Circles include all the legs (Community, Education and Service) of the three-legged stool of local involvement that SI promotes. As this Third Edition of the Wisdom Circle Guide is written, SI has over 40 Wisdom Circles in the United States, Canada and beyond. The purpose of this Guide is to provide a resource for leaders of existing Wisdom Circles as well as for persons who may wish to form a new Wisdom Circle in their community.

Much of this Guide was written several years ago, based on the early Circle work of Chuck Warren in Florida and Del Jones in Arizona. A second Edition was released two years ago, including text revisions by Paul Severance and new artwork by Cindy Siemers. Building on this earlier work, this Third Edition, edited by Gary Carlson, also includes (in the Appendix) the results of a recent survey of our existing Wisdom Circles. The survey was conducted earlier this year to establish a baseline of actual practice and experience for our Circles, some of which have now been in existence for over 15 years. We hope that this experience base will help leaders of both existing Circles and new Circles to improve the Circle process by incorporating some new ideas into their work.

Gary Carlson

July, 2016

Why a Circle?



Circle of Elders

Black Elk, Oglala Sioux Holy Man, reminds us of circle power as experienced in his culture:

"You have noticed that everything an Indian does is in a circle, and that is because the Power of the World always works in circles, and everything tries to be round...The sky is round, and I have heard that the earth is round like a ball, and so are all the stars. The wind, in its greatest power, whirls. Birds make their nests in circles, for theirs is the same religion as ours. Even the seasons form a great circle in their changing, and always come back again to where they were. The life of a (hu)man is a circle from childhood to childhood, and so it is in everything where power moves."

Our Wisdom Circles take place with the participants seated in a circle. Everyone is equidistant from the center, with equal visual access to everyone else. The process respects the experience and wisdom of each member of the circle. The circle is sacred-- the whole time together allows for speaking and hearing of truth. It is a place of safety and respect.

So it is appropriate in reclaiming our elderhood that we gather in circles.

"The power of the Circle...recognition of sacred space through ritual, the creation together of relational covenants to guide how we treat each other, the use of a talking piece to give everyone voice and promote good speaking and good listening, and a circle of collective wisdom where everyone is equally responsible for the outcome."

Tom Porter, Peace and Justice, United Methodist Church





A Wisdom Circle is...

- ❖ An opportunity to explore and share what is deeply meaningful to each of us regarding the journey from aging to Sage-ing®.
- ❖ A dialogue that focuses on topics related to aging and the changing role of elders in our society.
- ❖ A safe, respectful place to explore our feelings about growing older.
- ❖ A place for learning some tools to become wise sages.
- ❖ A community of like-minded persons.

A Wisdom Circle is not...



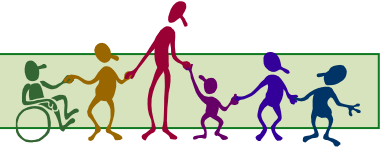
- ❖ A therapy group.
- ❖ A religious or political group.

The purpose of this Guide is...

- ❖ To guide you in deciding if you want to start a Wisdom Circle.
- ❖ To provide you with basic information on how to start a Wisdom Circle and how to maintain it.

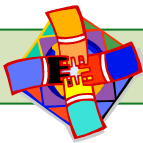


Why Create a Wisdom Circle?



To Support Each Other:

- ❖ In assuming our rightful place in our family and in society.
- ❖ In becoming appropriate role models for younger generations.
- ❖ In appreciating our elder years as an essential part of the human experience.
- ❖ In discovering the new role of elders as we live longer, healthier lives.
- ❖ In discovering mental and emotional aspects of ourselves that may have been neglected earlier in life.
- ❖ In becoming leaders with a unique vision for the world that comes with having lived a long life.
- ❖ Through discussion of topics such as self-love, developing wisdom, forgiveness, facing mortality, leaving a legacy and other Sage-ing® teachings.



Fundamental Agreements

- ❖ We commit to confidentiality: What is said in the Wisdom Circle stays in the Circle. In this way everyone will feel safe and will be able to share more willingly and openly.
- ❖ When a participant is speaking, we listen with compassion and without judgment, maintaining an open mind to what is being said.
- ❖ No one is ever required to say or do anything he/she is not comfortable with.
- ❖ We speak only for ourselves; using "I" statements; We speak in a way that encourages dialogue; We strive to be brief and to the point.

- ❖ We listen with respect; We listen for understanding; We are open to be transformed.

How to Begin



- ❖ Select a convenient date, a time to begin and a time to end, and a location for the meeting. Consider parking, physical comfort, abilities of members to get in and out of the building.
- ❖ Select five to ten people to invite. Consider the “Guidelines for Wisdom Circle Participants” section below.
- ❖ In planning your initial meetings, here are some questions/suggestions you may want to consider:
 - Consider how long you might like the group to continue. This could be decided by the group after the first few sessions.
 - Be aware that some participants may experience hearing loss and encourage them to sit near the speaker.
 - What topic do you want to start with? (See the list of suggested topics below)
 - Do you want music? Soft music might help set the tone when participants enter the room. It also could be helpful if you start the meeting with a short personal (five minutes) reflection time. Classical music or sounds of nature are good choices. Spring Hill Music has excellent selections.
 - A focal point in the middle of the circle can give meaning to the group. This could include objects from nature, or every one could bring a small object meaningful to them to place in the center. Each person could use their object to introduce themselves.

- You might want to begin with a poem, a short meaningful story, or quiet time to reflect. See the resources below for poetry and story ideas.
- Checking in: Open the meeting with an opportunity for each person to say how they are doing, what is new in their life, etc.
- How will you end the meeting? Each person could say what the group meant to them, or what they learned. A poem or reflection time are also good ways to end.
- Should there be some time to socialize before or after the discussion?
- Will you include refreshments?
- Some Circles use a “talking stick” which is a decorated stick held by whoever is speaking. Only the person holding the talking stick speaks. When the speaker is done, they pass the stick to the person on the right (or alternatively, put down the talking stick in the middle of the circle, and whoever wants to speak next picks it up). This practice helps everyone give full attention to the speaker, and prevents “talking over” each other.

Here are some resources you may find valuable:

- ❖ The seminal book *“From Age-ing to Sage-ing: A Revolutionary Approach to Growing Older” (2014 Edition)* by Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Ronald S. Miller can provide an excellent book study for a Wisdom Circle. It has exercises at the end of the book that can be done in the group, or done as homework to be discussed in the group.
- ❖ The key concepts and practices of Sage-ing are presented in workbook format in *“The Sage-ing Workbook”* available from Sage-ing International at <http://sage-ing.org/shop/>.
- ❖ We also recommend that you explore the resources offered by PeerSpirit, Inc., including The Circle Way process, based on the life

work of Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea, which has served as a valuable source for some of our work. They have a number of terrific resources available at <http://www.peerspirit.com/books-audio-gifts.html>, including:

- Their free, downloadable "*Basic Circle Guidelines*" which is available in several different languages.
 - Their guidebook, "*A Harvest of Years, A PeerSpirit Guide for ProActive Aging Circles*," (written by their colleague Cynthia Trenshaw).
 - Their book, "*The Circle Way: A Leader in Every Chair*."
 - Christina's book, "*Calling the Circle: The First and Future Culture*."
- ❖ Sage-ing® International encourages the formation of Wisdom Circles in local communities. Consult our Sage-ing website at <https://www.sage-ing.org/chapters/> to see if an existing Circle is available in your area. If not, you might want to form one. Sage-ing International can help you to get started.
- ❖ It is not necessary that a person be a trained Sage-ing Leader to start or lead a Circle. In fact, the majority of Circle leaders are not trained Sage-ing Leaders. However, you might want to receive training in leading a Circle as part of a Sage-ing Professional Development program.

Role of the Facilitator

- Decide on the leadership structure of the Circle: A rotating facilitator, a permanent facilitator or some other form of facilitator structure.
- Facilitator plans content and agenda.
- Facilitator assures that Circle will open/close on time.
- Facilitator tries to be aware of what is on the minds of participants and

creates a direction around the needs of the moment.

- Facilitator allows time for feedback on how/if the circle is meeting the needs of all.



Sample Agenda

Call the Circle: Light a candle.

Opening: A poem, quote, or some words of wisdom about the topic.

Review the Guidelines:

Listen with respect; seek to understand, not persuade; speak from your heart with meaning using “I” messages; be brief.

Check-in: For this you may want to use a talking stick to eliminate any cross talk.

For the check-in, each participant tells briefly some news of their life. The facilitator could ask for some response to a certain point on the topic of the day.

Topic of the Day: (see Suggested Topics section for ideas, suggestions)

Facilitator presents new information, tells about a book, an article, uses quotes, poems and then poses some questions for discussion.

Discussion: Divide group into 2’s, 3’s, or 4’s and allow about 15-30 minutes for discussion.

Give 3-5 minute warning to conclude. Convene back into circle.

Share AHA's:

This is a dialogue/discussion about the topic—new learnings, sharings with whole group from individuals or the small groups.

Check-out:

Talking stick may be used here also. Each participant may say just a sentence, or if time is short, even one word; or each participant might address the question "*What new intention do you take away from this meeting?*"

Closing the circle:

Closing thought, poem, words. Blow out candle, retrieve items from table, etc.

Suggested Topics

The range of topics that can be discussed in a Wisdom Circle is limited only by your imagination. Some are very explicitly Sage-ing/Conscious Aging topics, while others are more general aging topics that nevertheless can initiate very profitable and stimulating discussions. Below are some discussion topics that have been used successfully by Wisdom Circles.

1. What is an elder's role in society today?
2. How do I feel about aging?
3. How do I feel about change? Do I resist it? If so, how?
4. Forgiveness: What is it and how is it done?
5. How do I prepare for my mortality?



6. What role does purpose play in my life?
7. Discuss books, movies and poetry that have influenced me (see the book list under Other Resources on page 13 for book study ideas).
8. What do I have to offer to my family, my community, my world?
9. What regrets do I have? What do I celebrate?
10. What do I still want to accomplish?
11. What role does passion play in my life?
12. Other suggested topics may be found in the resource materials discussed on page 8 of this Guide.
13. The Los Alamos, NM group has created an extensive list of topics and commentary from their gatherings over an 8 year period (see <http://can-nm.org/more-on-can-nm/elder-circles/>).
14. Elder Circles in Tucson have used the following topics: Approaches to end of life; Embracing your legacy; Conscious listening; Who am I becoming?; Planning your funeral; Inner wisdom; Wills; Ethical wills; Advanced health care directives; Mentoring; Forgiveness.

Where to Recruit Participants

1. Group of friends and neighbors who are ready for the journey.
2. Your neighborhood coffee klatch.
3. Your faith community.
4. Advertise for members at your public library.
5. Recruit at assisted living facilities and retirement communities.
6. Others involved in a Sage-ing Chapter or other Sage-ing work

Guidelines for Wisdom Circle Participants

- ❖ Be a good listener.
- ❖ Be comfortable with silence.
- ❖ Leave the need to advise or fix others.
- ❖ Have a general sense of curiosity.
- ❖ Keep an open mind to the views of others.
- ❖ Have a good sense of humor and use it wisely.
- ❖ Appreciate the differences among people.
- ❖ Be willing to be vulnerable, reflect honestly on your life experience, share your feelings and learn.



Other Resources

Books (see <https://www.sage-ing.org/books/> for more)

- Books by Richard Leider, including *The Power of Purpose*; *Something to Live For: Finding Your Way in the Second Half of Life*; *Claiming Your Place at the Fire: Living The Second Half of your Life on Purpose*; and *Repacking Your Bags: Lighten Your Load for the Rest of Your Life*
- *The December Project* by Sarah Davidson
- *The Second Half of Life* by Angeles Arrien
- *Spirituality and Aging* by Robert Atchley

- *Life Gets Better: The Unexpected Pleasures of Growing Older*, by Wendy Lustbader
- *The Little Book of Circle Processes*, by Kay Pranis
- *Secrets of Becoming A Late Bloomer: Staying Creative, Aware, and Involved in Mid-Life and Beyond* by Connie Goldman
- *Essential Writings* by Thich Nhat Hanh
- *Ageless Body, Timeless Mind: The Quantum Alternative to Growing Old* by Deepak Chopra, M.D.

Books with Poetry or Stories that may be shared in the Circle

- *Beyond Forgiveness: Reflections on Atonement* edited by Phil Cousineau
- *The Enlightened Heart: An Anthology of Sacred Poetry* Edited by Stephen Mitchell
- *My Grandfather’s Blessings* by Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D.
- *Kitchen Table Wisdom* by Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D.
- *Wisdom of the Elders: Sacred Native Stories of Nature* by David Suzuki and Peter Knudtson



Movies and DVDs

- Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth
- The Power of Forgiveness



Music

- Wisdom of the World
- Spring Hill Music





Wisdom Circles: A Bit of History

In his book, *From Age-ing to Sage-ing®*, *A Profound New Vision for Growing Older*, Zalman Schachter-Shalomi gets our attention immediately with the fact that studies on childhood and adulthood have been the focus of many books and studies and at that time few had written or studied the third phase of life, ELDERHOOD. How can we move from “age-ing” to “sage-ing”?

He said: “A person has to be serious about wanting to harvest a lifetime. Most people are depressed when they get old because they have nothing to look forward to. And people are not wanting to face their mortality. So there is homework. You can’t become an elder without doing the homework.”

And so the idea of Wisdom Circles emerged. Here was a way to deal with life completion—overcome the denial of aging. Here was a way of creating together a place of safety and respect. Here was a way to **harvest our lives**. Kierkegaard said we live life forward, but we understand it backward. Harvesting your life is a way to look backward and forward.

Robert Butler called it life review, the practice of formally examining one’s past and noting its patterns, trends and lessons.

Older cultures knew about elderhood. Native Americans describe Elderhood as “our work.” In the ceremony of initiation into elderhood, a circle of elders discusses what it means to become an elder of the tribe and how the years ahead will be a time of significant responsibility and contribution.

It is time to change this culture’s story on aging. Today we can reclaim our voice in a **circle of elders**.

Today we can engage in dialogues of genuine depth. This is a place where the asking of questions is more crucial than getting answers...questions like:

- How can I pass on wisdom accumulated through my experiences?
- Who feels like “kin” to me?

- How can I share my interests and inspirations?

So it is time, as Richard Leider says in his book of the same name to "*claim our place at the fire.*" The new elder, he says, is seeking answers to these questions: Who am I? Where do I belong? What do I care about? What is my life's purpose? It is about elder stories. And elder stories, my story, your story, our story, is what Wisdom Circles are all about.

Wisdom Circles are about the third phase of life—after childhood and adulthood comes elderhood. In her book, *The Second Half of Life*, Angeles Arrien says, "We have 4 frontiers to face:

- Retirement: from what, toward what
- Becoming a mentor, steward or grandparent
- Coping with the natural challenges of maintaining the health of an aging body
- Mortality: losing our loved ones, and the inevitability of our own death."

Wisdom Circles...a safe, respectful place for the new elder to journey from older to elder, from a doing-person to a being-person, and from age-ing to Sage-ing



About Sage-ing® International

Sage-ing International is a community of elders and elders-to-be around the globe, whose mission is to create a world which respects and honors elders by:

- 👁️ Offering a new vision of elderhood as a time of learning, growth, and contribution
- 👁️ Supporting each other through our website, educational materials, Chapters and Wisdom Circles, in growing into the role of sage – the wise elders so desperately needed in our families, our neighborhoods, and our world.
- 👁️ Offering workshops and creating inspirational and educational materials.
- 👁️ Empowering elders to serve their communities and the world through Sage-ing training.

Check out the many resources we have available on our website (www.sage-ing.org), and take advantage of our free membership offer.



Appendix—Wisdom Circle Survey Results

A survey of active SI Wisdom Circles in April, 2016 was answered by 30 Wisdom Circle leaders, representing roughly 75% of all Wisdom Circles that we could identify at that time. In this Appendix, we will summarize the information gathered from all respondents to the questions on the survey. Where relevant, we will also add comments based on our overall assessment of the survey results.

Question 1. *What do you call your Circle?* Well over half of respondents call their Circle a Wisdom Circle (often with the location added), while others used a variety of other names (Elder Circle, Breakfast of Elders, Aging with Purpose, Sage-ing Program, Saturday Salon, Conscious Aging Conversations, etc.)

Question 2. *How long has your Circle been in operation?* One year or less (12 groups); 2-5 years (15 groups); over 5 years (3 groups). *Comment: clearly, although there are a number of relatively new groups, there are many that have been in operation from several years to over 15 years, attesting to the general popularity and stability of our Circles.*

Question 3. *How was your group originally formed?* Wisdom Circles have most often been formed as a follow-on activity after a Sage-ing workshop (such as an Intensive or Awakening the Sage Within) or other related activity (13 groups). Other answers include a felt need by the originator for a personal support group (11 groups) and requests from a support organization (library; social service agency; church) to create a discussion/support group (6 groups). *Comment: often, a Sage-ing workshop is a standalone activity that may leave participants with nowhere to go afterwards for continuing to learn and grow; a Circle provides a way to continue to explore and to be part of a community of like-minded persons.*

Question 4. *How often does your group meet?* 16 meet monthly and 14 meet more frequently (roughly equally divided between weekly and every two weeks)

Question 5. *How long is your typical meeting?* For most groups (23), it is 2 hours, while 2 groups meet for 2-3 hours and 4 groups meet for one hour. *Comment: clearly, a two-hour format meets most groups' needs.*

Question 6. *Is your group open or closed? (ie, is the meeting open to new people, or limited to a certain defined group?)* Most groups (21) are open, while 9 groups are closed. *Comment: the longest-running groups (5 to 15 years) are all open groups, indicating that loss of group members over time may be more of a problem for closed groups.*

Question 7. *Is group participation free, or is there a charge, and for what?* Twenty six groups are free, while 3 charge a nominal fee to cover materials, room rental or facilitator fees.

Question 8. *How many participants do you have, on average? What is the typical agenda for a group meeting? (Examples would be: opening ritual, check-in, business meeting, sharing food, facilitated discussion, closing ritual, etc.)* Average number of participants across all groups is 10, with a range from four to twenty five. Agendas are generally similar, usually including check-in, any group business (such as choosing future topics or facilitators), facilitated discussion and closing. Additionally, various groups incorporate some of the following: candle lighting, meditative time, opening ritual, shared food, poetry, readings, music, TED talks, book discussions, closing ritual, and social time afterward.

Question 9. *How is the group leader chosen? What is her/his role?* In the majority of cases, the Circle leader is the person who initially organized the Circle, and then remained in the leadership position. *Comment: in the majority of cases, the Circle leader is not a Sage-ing Leader (looking at the entire list of Circle leaders, only 16 are CSLs or SCFs; the remaining 25 or so Circles are led by a person without formal Sage-ing training who simply decided, or was asked by some group, to start a Circle).* Roles of the leader may include some or all of the following: introducing and managing group activities (such as check-ins), facilitating discussions, handling group dynamics, providing supplies, managing the list of group members and sending announcements.

Question 10. *How are discussion topics chosen? How is the discussion facilitator chosen? Do you have a suggested/preferred format for discussions and group interactions?* This varies widely. Some Circles are run by the group leader, with discussion topics chosen and facilitated by that leader. More often, however, the choice of discussion topics is managed within the group by the participants, and often, the discussion facilitator is simply a group member who agrees in advance to facilitate a particular

topic. Rotating facilitation seems to create a nice sense of belonging for group members. Format for discussions and group interactions are generally similar to Sage-ing workshops, with a brief introduction to a topic (five minutes may be enough), followed by a question or two for journaling or dyadic discussion and then harvesting in the whole group. *Comment: ordinarily, with a fairly brief introduction, the discussion is self-generating and most group members participate willingly. Personally, the only really ineffective group discussions I have seen have been those where the facilitator talked too long or was too academic. Groups generally are much more comfortable with a "guide on the side," not a "sage on the stage."*

Question 11. *Do you require that discussion topics be Sage-ing topics (versus more general topics of interest to an older population)?* Six groups require that discussion topics be Sage-ing topics, while 20 groups do not require this. However, several respondents suggested that almost all topics of interest to elders are actually Sage-ing topics, even if not specifically identified as such in the Sage-ing Workbook or From Age-ing to Sage-ing. *Comment: having a looser definition of suitable topics can lead to some very rich discussions (for example, Grandparenting, Transitions, Down-sizing, Housing options, Technology for Seniors, Suddenly Single, How Much is Enough? to name a few). See Pages 11-12 for ideas of topics that have been used in Circles.*

Question 12. *Do you require/encourage participants to be/become SI members?* Twelve groups generally encourage, 15 groups do not encourage or require participants to be/become SI members. *Comment: generally, there does not appear to be a strong feeling that Circle participants need to be members of SI. However, it might be advantageous to the participants to occasionally discuss the benefits of SI membership.*

Question 13. *What is your overall evaluation of the success of your group? What things would you point to as responsible for this success or lack of success?* By far the majority of groups report good to great success, with the sense of community being a very important product of the Circle experience. A few groups are "treading water" and perhaps they can benefit from seeing how other groups operate to increase their success. *Comment: there appears to be a tendency for the most successful groups to have more of a participant-driven aspect (rotating facilitation and discussion topics*

chosen by group). This is not surprising, since these characteristics tend to promote a sense of ownership by the participants.

Question 14. Does your Circle also serve a role as a Sage-ing Chapter? If yes, please explain briefly how it fills that role. Four Circles also serve as Sage-ing Chapters, while 21 do not and 3 weren't sure. Comment: generally, the roles of Circle and Chapter are different enough that it is probably more appropriate to separate the two functions. Chapter members typically are SI members and Chapter activities are focused on supporting local Sage-ing activities, while Circle members are often not SI members and may not wish to be.

Question 15. What kind of support from SI would help you in your Circle work? The most commonly requested support is for information on how Circles have worked for others, and for lists of potential discussion topics. Comment: this Appendix is all about information on how Circles work in practice. Some lists of potential discussion topics are included in the Guide (see Pages 11-12).

Other requested support includes better ways for Circle leaders to communicate with each other, for example through the website using a blog page or Circle resource page specifically for Circle leaders. Comment: that will be developed in the future. The good news is that most Circle leaders feel that their Circles are functioning well and they don't feel a great need for additional support from SI. Those leaders may be able to give help or advice to others who aren't doing as well.