

Facilitator's Guide for Living **AWAKE** Circles

A Companion Guide to
Living AWAKE: Forty Days Toward Renewal

"Here the reader will find a series of practices . . . which will heal the soul, refresh the mind and heart, and open up new pathways."

—From the foreword by Alan Jones, dean emeritus of
Grace Cathedral and honorary canon of Chartres Cathedral

living **AWAKE** *Forty Days Toward Renewal*



Mary Bea Sullivan

Facilitator's Guide for Living AWAKE Circles

Welcome to Living AWAKE.

Living AWAKE: Forty Days Toward Renewal is a compilation of brief spiritual reflections and practices that can be completed in 15 minutes or less each day for 40 days. Readers have reported that at the end of the 40-day journey they feel a closer connection to God, themselves, and the world around them, as well as a sense of renewal.

This facilitator's guide is intended to serve in the development and facilitation of weekly gatherings of Living AWAKE Circles. The **primary purpose of a Living AWAKE Circle** is for a small group to gather weekly to support one another in completing the 40-day journey and creating a safe environment for sharing one another's experiences with the material.

You may **tailor this material to meet your needs**. The following are simply suggestions based upon my experience as a facilitator and feedback from the Living AWAKE pilot groups.

If you have questions, suggestions, or feedback of any kind, feel free to email me at **mary@marybeasullivan.com**. If you want to share your experience, please comment on my website (**www.marybeasullivan.com**) or send me an email. This is a dynamic process, I welcome the opportunity to incorporate improvements.

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Praise for Living AWAKE

"Living AWAKE is a treasure chest of insight, wisdom, and practice. This forty-day journey invites the reader to know herself with love, and to then lavish that love on others."

—Rev. Mary C. Earle, Days of Grace: Meditations and Practices for Living with Illness

Gathering a Group

It is best if one or two persons take responsibility for inviting participants, ongoing communication, and creating a safe, sacred space for meeting. Actual facilitation of the circles may be shared among group members depending on the desires and skills of the participants.

Ideally a circle will be comprised of six to eight participants. This size group is big enough for energy and diversity of perspectives and small enough to create intimacy and time for members to share deeply.

For those involved in a faith community, inviting others in that community to join is a natural starting point. You could target specific groups such as mothers of young children, retirees, or couples. Or, it may seem best to welcome anyone within the congregation to participate. The 40-day format is ideal for Lenten study, but can be used at any time.

The content and format of *Living AWAKE* is not exclusive to faith communities. You may wish to invite friends, co-workers, neighbors, book club members, or anyone else you believe would enjoy this fruitful endeavor.

Below is information that can be used in an email or snail mail invitation or as some “talking points” for a conversation. Again, make the invitation your own.

Invitation to Participate

Email or call your prospective participants. It is best to include the following information:

- Why you are choosing to create a Living AWAKE Circle. This might be a personal desire to go deeper in your spiritual life; yearning for spiritual community; need for support in staying with the 40-day promise; anything that has called you to this practice and your desire to share it with a group.
- What to expect in coming together:
 - Participants commit to spend at least 15 minutes per day for 40 days with the material from *Living AWAKE: Forty Days Toward Renewal*.
 - Group will meet for one hour once a week, for a period of seven weeks.
 - All discussions will be held in confidence.
- When and where you will meet.
- Size of the group and perhaps who else is invited.
- Ask for names of others who might be interested.

Sample Email

Dear _____:

I am writing to invite you to join me and a small group in meeting weekly for seven weeks to support one another in deepening our spiritual lives. We will be using the book *Living AWAKE: Forty Days Toward Renewal*, by Mary Bea Sullivan, as our primary resource.

Living AWAKE is a compilation of brief spiritual reflections and practices that can be completed in 15 minutes or less each day for 40 days. I am excited about this opportunity and hope that in coming together once a week to confidentially share our experiences we will deepen our connection to God, ourselves, and one another.

We will meet (*day of the week and time, circle should only be an hour*) at (*place*). It would be wonderful if you could join us. Is this of interest to you? Do you know of anyone else who might be a good fit for this group?

Thanks for considering this! I look forward to hearing from you.

P.S. For information on *Living AWAKE* you may go to www.marybeasullivan.com or Amazon.com.

Prior to Your First Meeting

Send an email to all of the participants to begin creating community via the web with:

- Instruction for participants to read the introduction of *Living AWAKE* before the first circle.
- Directions and information regarding the meeting place.
- Request for all participants to arrive five minutes early.

Creating a Safe, Sacred Space

Ideally the meeting space should be relatively quiet and private so that participants will not be concerned about being overheard or interrupted. The facilitator should arrive early, allowing time to arrange chairs/couches in a circle. It is a nice touch to place a small table in the center and create an altar of some kind with meaningful items. A single flower in a vase, icon, cross, prayer beads, and candles are possible altar items.

Before participants arrive, sit quietly and set an intention/say a prayer for your time together.

Warmly greet each person as he or she arrives, and introduce those who do not know one another. Name tags are recommended unless everyone is already acquainted. As the facilitator, your openness and acceptance of others will set the tone for the group.

Facilitation Tips

- Begin each session by inviting everyone to close their eyes and sit in silence for a moment or two to allow their “souls to catch up with them.”
- Strike a balance between offering enough instructions so everyone will feel comfortable and leaving ample space for others to participate.
- Ask open-ended questions that will illicit deep responses. Ask *why* or *how* questions rather than *yes* or *no* questions. Also use discussion prompts such as, “Tell me about a significant spiritual experience.”
- Share openly and honestly, as an equal, rather than as an emotionally distant leader.
- If an individual is monopolizing the discussion, you may need to “break in” gently and redirect so others can participate. IF this becomes an ongoing issue, call or meet privately with this person to discuss.
- If anyone expresses frustration with another member, listen patiently. If appropriate, share your intention to address the situation.
- Under no circumstances do you want to engage in gossip or speak disparagingly about a member of the group. Remember, you are setting the example for how the group will interact.
- You may find that some people can barely make time to do the readings each day, let alone the exercises. Perhaps it will help for others to share how they are carving out the time. However, avoid the temptation to try to “fix” anyone. In one of the pilot groups, there was a single mom who came every week but only did a fraction of the exercises. She gained and gave much by listening and participating in the discussions.
- *Meet your participants where they are. Be an encouraging presence. Life is busy enough. This is intended to be an exercise in self-love and discovery, not a drudgery on the to-do list.*

Week One: Setting the Stage

The first circle will set the structure and tone for the series. Be prepared, calm, and centered. You are opening the door to a wonderful experience!

1. After a minute or two of silence, ask each person to *briefly* introduce himself or herself and what his or her hopes are for this time.
2. Establish guidelines together and mutually agree to follow them. Suggestions:
 - a. Keep all discussion confidential.
 - b. Arrive five minutes early.
 - c. Notify someone if you will miss a circle.
 - d. Turn off cell phones/pagers.
 - e. Be respectful in your dialogue and open to others' ways of expressing themselves.
 - f. Do your best to spend 15 minutes per day on the exercises and to come to all circles. If this does not happen, no one will be chastised.
 - g. Any suggestions from the group.
3. Outline format for weekly meetings:
 - a. Reflect on the material from the previous week.
 - b. Complete an exercise together from the upcoming week's material.
 - c. Share in a wisdom circle.
4. Facilitate wisdom circle. Explain the WISDOM CIRCLE GUIDELINES:
 - a. Facilitator poses a question to the group. Each person is encouraged to speak from his or her *personal experience*.
 - b. One person speaks at a time. This person is identified by holding a sacred object (this can be anything: a rock, jewelry, cross, etc.). The object may be placed in the center, and participants can pick it up as they are moved to speak. Or, it may be passed along the circle.
 - c. All sharing is kept confidential.
 - d. The speaker is encouraged to:
 - (1) Speak from the heart.
 - (2) Be lean of expression; aware of the need for others to speak.
 - (3) "Pass" if they wish; silence is welcome.
 - e. Listeners are instructed to:
 - (1) Listen devoutly.
 - (2) Without judgment.
 - (3) Without "rehearsing" what they will say during their time to speak. Trust the Spirit to move you when it is your turn.
 - (4) This is an exercise in presence. There are no "right" or "wrong" answers. There is no "fixing," helping, or trying to change another person in the circle. Simply listen to one another and allow one another to speak uninterrupted.

5. For this first session, use the following open-ended statements for the wisdom circle: At this point my connection to God is best described as... This connection is strengthened by... (prompts from Day 2). Allow each of the participants to respond to the statements while holding the sacred item. After everyone has spoken, thank them for sharing honestly.
6. After the wisdom circle, instruct participants to begin reading and completing the exercises for Days 1–7 during the coming week.
7. Close with an appropriate prayer.

Each Week After Week One

1. Begin with a period of silence. You may want to invite someone to open with a brief prayer or poem and then sit in silence.
2. Ask for feedback and discuss the previous week's exercises. Some suggestions:
 - a. What was particularly meaningful for you?
 - b. Was there an exercise that was difficult? If so, why?
 - c. How well were you able to set aside the time? What helped? Hindered?
3. Look ahead to the upcoming week and practice one of the exercises together. Below are suggestions for each week.
4. Facilitate a wisdom circle.
5. Close with a prayer.

Week Two: Review Days 1–7

Suggested practice: Day 11 — Centering Prayer

If you are unfamiliar with this practice, do this at least once yourself before your group meets. On the day of the circle, read the instructions to the group and then sit in silent prayer. Twenty minutes is recommended, but you may need to sit for a shorter period depending upon available time.

Suggested wisdom circle question: How have you been blessed with abundance?

Week Three: Review Days 8–14

Suggested practice: Day 19—Walking Meditation, “Love God, Love Neighbor”

Explain the practice and encourage the group to take off their shoes (if they wish) and mindfully walk in silence. Use the instructions on page 79–80. If you are meeting in a church, you may wish to use the worship space. Or, you might find a quiet spot outside.

Suggested wisdom circle question: What new is stirring in you as a result of taking this time for daily practice?

Week Four: Review Days 15–21

Suggested practice: Day 25—Forgiveness Prayer

After a brief discussion about forgiveness, lead the group through Alla Bozarth’s forgiveness prayer. Invite the participants to close their eyes. Then, at a measured pace, read the instructions on page 104. Repeat the mantra three times.

Suggested wisdom circle question: What are some of the emotions or habits that hinder my ability to fully embrace life?

Week Five: Review Days 22–28

Suggested practice: Day 33—Identify Spiritual Companions

Bring a notepad and pen for each participant. Ask the participants to journal a response to one or more of the questions listed on page 136. Allow ample time for them to silently respond.

Suggested wisdom circle questions: How are you supported by others in your spiritual journey? What might you do to further develop “spirit buddies”?

Week Six: Review Days 29–35

Suggested practice: Day 36—Lectio Divina

Slowly read the instructions on pages 147–148. Allow quiet space between each reading of the passage.

Suggested wisdom circle questions: In what ways are you open and/or generous? Is there some way in which you wish to be more generous?

Week Seven: Review Days 36–40 and Wrap Up

Suggested practice: Extended time for wisdom circle

Suggested wisdom circle questions: What would you like to say to the people with whom you have shared this circle? What have you learned? For what are you grateful? What has been challenging? How have you changed? Anything you would like to share.

Be especially mindful of the opportunity to give thanks and for closure.

Thank You

Thank you for offering yourself to this Living AWAKE endeavor! My hope is that it has been challenging and rewarding for you and the circle participants. May the experience continue to grow in you beyond these 40 days, and may you embrace the call to live closer to God, loving yourself and others.

Blessings,

Mary Bea Sullivan

Don't Forget!

If you have questions, suggestions, or feedback of any kind, feel free to email me at mary@marybeasullivan.com. If you want to share your experience, please comment on my website (www.marybeasullivan.com) or send an me an email.