



Central Christian Church Community Outreach

Circles of Peace: A model of communication that invites us from conversation to action

Overview

Central has a history of social action from the upstart congregation to suffragette thru support for the redesign of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and into the church that is striving to be radically welcoming in a world that frequently shuns the stranger. In our recent history, we celebrate the wide diversity we have in the areas of socioeconomics, political beliefs, areas of education, and call to action. And this diversity leaves us with a dilemma when calling members to advocacy and action for justice. What action do “we” believe is just? What do we advocate for? How do we decide?

It has been said many times that the art of debate, the role of sincere discussion is losing its place in our fast paced society. Many hear sound bites or read a brief news article and based on their impression of the person speaking or the context of the story, opinions are formed or complex issues set aside as too time consuming to figure out or too hard to think about. We hand off the research and exploration to others with more time or a better understanding of the issue. And in so doing, we hand off the responsibility for advocacy, action and support in healing for those who have been wounded or oppressed.

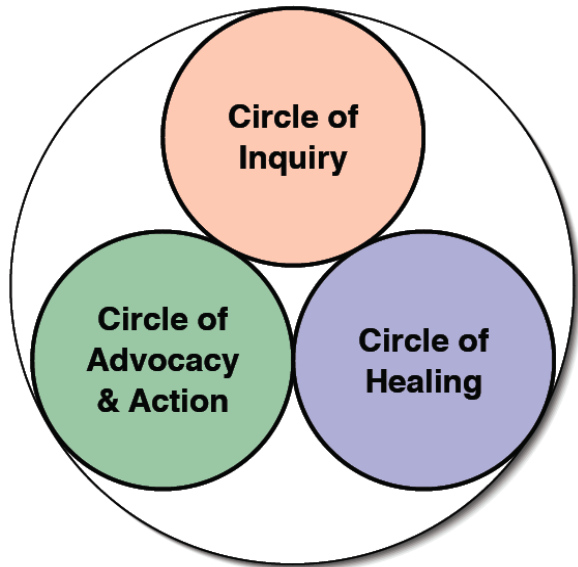
In few topics is there a single answer or is the answer as readily apparent as it might seem. At the last General Assembly for the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) there was a resolution having to do with the wall Israel is building. From our congregation, from two well-respected, well educated, well traveled individuals were two very divergent views of for what we should be advocating. And then there were those of us who didn't have enough information to have a strong opinion.

There are many topics that are calling us to action: living wage, hunger & poverty, globalization, issues surrounding the rights of gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgender, immigration, housing, environment, fair trade, rights of children, education, the state of the church... the list goes on and on.

There is no **one** right answer to any of these issues – no clear-cut - no one can deny it, road to justice. And we do not want to call people to action without first giving them a path to understanding and a place to find their voice. And as we do this we will find that even after seeing the same information, hearing the same stories and thinking through with intention and following the Spirit, we still come out in different places and with

resoundingly different thoughts on the action that should be taken. And that is as it should be.

The following is a proposal for a model in which to have those conversations and then move off into action, advocacy and healing.



Circle of Peace

a sense of containment, the circle has a beginning, middle and end that are framed through simple rituals appropriate to the group and setting. The circle has a shared, verbalized intention so that everyone knows why they are gathered. The circle self-governs and corrects its course through the adoption of commonsense agreements of behavior. And when confusion arises, or the way is momentarily lost, everyone agrees to fall into reflective silence, refocus on the group's highest purpose and follow protocols for problem solving that reestablish trust and cohesion. In such a circle leadership rotates, responsibility is shared and the group comes to rely deeply on Spirit.

More about how the circles function and the philosophy behind the circles will be presented later in the document.



Circles of Inquiry

For each issue that is to be addressed, there will be a sponsor – a caller of the circle. This is much different than a leader for the circle and the difference is key to the functioning of the circle. If a person who has worked with the marginalized leads a discussion on living wage, the results may be quite different than if a politician running for office leads a discussion on the same topic. The goal of the circle is to give both of those people a voice, but one voice among many with the group depending on the wisdom of the Spirit invited to the center of the circle.

The model is comprised of three circles placed inside a single larger circle. The rims of the circles are firm. There are strong boundaries around the intention of the circles. This is deliberate and will be part of the covenant of the circle.

We are using the form of the circle both for the graphic and for the model of meeting. In Christina Baldwin's book **Calling the Circle** she describes the circle as follows:

This kind of circle... is a council of ordinary people who convene to create a sacred space and from that space accomplish a specific task, supporting each other in the process. Because it has

The circle will be called for a set period of time that can be revisited by the members of the circle. For example, it is possible that a single gathering may give people as much time as they want to learn about an issue. But on other issues, a longer time is needed for discussion, research and thought. This first circle is called a **Circle of Inquiry**. And that is its only function. It is its verbalized intention. It is to share stories, ask sincere questions that may be at odds with what the majority think. For example when discussing the military in Iraq in a group that is comprised of many members of Central, it would be right and appropriate for someone who sincerely has the question to ask – “and how do we get rid of someone so powerful that the masses are terrified to fight and peacekeepers aren’t allowed in.” Much can be learned by how the question is asked and these questions invite us to think from perspectives that may not be familiar to us.

Although most of the discussions will hopefully have someone in the group who feels passionately about acting on the issue or needing support and healing around the issue, the Circle of Inquiry is not the place for that. For example if the topic is same gender marriage, the Circle of Inquiry should be a safe place for someone to support **and** for someone to disagree. If someone is seeking support for their marriage and sees the group as an advocacy group for them, it is much less likely that someone who sincerely believes it is wrong will speak up and share their opinions and questions in fear of hurting someone in the community whom they care about. Circles of Inquiry are not for everyone. They are for those who can hear a question without also feeling an attack. (*I need a softer way to way this*)



Circles of Advocacy & Action

As a result of discussion, members of the Circle of Inquiry and other members of the community may want to move forward into some form of advocacy or action. This circle is **not** the same circle as the Circle of Inquiry. Its intention is very different. For example, if someone called a Circle of Inquiry on globalization and that circle met and had authentic discussion, it is likely that out of that group some would want to be part of the change happening around the topic. This might be advocating for or against legislation, sharing information about current political actions that have an effect on those affected. It might lead to someone reviewing the buying habits of the church or writing articles for the newsletter explaining how our buying effects those around the world. Speakers may be invited, petitions put out, resources shared via the website, handouts or additions to the church library. The difference between this and how we currently do advocacy and action is that frequently we put the petition out and someone may or may not stand beside it with a brief explanation of the issue. Or we choose to purchase recycled chlorine paper – increasing the spending on that line item of the budget with no announcement or discussion. In both cases the action may be considered “right” by most of us and we’ve not had the opportunity to find out. When people understand an issue, they are more likely to get behind it – for good or ill depending on your perspective on the issue.

It is possible that opposing views may come from Circles of Inquiry. It is possible that two different courses of action may be taken. And while we may wish that we could

come to consensus on all issues, it would be unreasonable to believe that we can. What we have gained from the process is that we have a better understanding of those with whom we disagree. We disagree on the issue and with the action and still are able to remember the story and humanity of those with whom we disagree.



Circles of Healing

The third circle is a Circle of Healing. This may be a support group of people affected by the topic. It may also be a group of people who want to participate in offering support to those affected. For example, when considering the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and questioning folks, there may be healing to be done by parents and friends of this population who haven't been able to come to terms with the issue. There may be some who can sit with them, listen and be the presence they need to work through or to simply come to the place they feel is right for them. These are not to be "therapy" groups in the formal sense. There won't be a counselor present in a professional capacity. It will be a community of people with a common need or a desire to provide a non-anxious presence while waiting for healing to happen.

It is possible that two or three different circles may form with different intents. And that is as it should be.

Why a Circle

About 400,000 years ago, when humans captured the spark of fire and began to carry the embers along from site to site, a new way of being together came into their experience. They began to face each other as they made a circle around the flame. Coming together at dusk, they found shelter for the night and brought the safety of the light with them. The fire warded off predatory animals and allowed them to cook the meat and roast the roots and nuts, which were the staples of their diets. With the flame, they could sustain more people, provide more food and extend the offer of safety. Something magic happened then, something dawned in the human mind: our ancestors took a great leap in building community and consciousness through conversation.

It is this leap which circle still offers us: community and consciousness through conversation. To form a circle is the choice to remove oneself from the middle, and to place something else there around which we all can gather. Every circle, from the first campfire to the United Nations, asks for this commitment: to put at the center the group's highest purpose, and to sit on the rim focused on that purpose. Humans started here—literally facing the fire and tending the needs of the community—and here is where we return—using circle to face the burning questions of our times and tending to their solutions. (from <http://www.fromthefourdirections.org/>)

Whether this is a historical truth or creative visualization, it encapsulates the essence of the circle. Rather than a class, a lecture or a business meeting, the circle is a place where

people come to be part of community, to place a portion of themselves in the center and to count on the Spirit to guide the circle in its work. There has been much research and writing done on the functioning of circles. The two authors most influential on this document are Margaret Wheatley and Christina Baldwin.

The circle takes the community away from the hierarchical form of community that we have become used to and takes us forward into a model where each voice is heard – and those being silent are noted.

How Circles Function

Each circle is “called” by an individual or a group of people who have defined an intention for the circle. This could be a circle of inquiry on issues of globalization that is meeting so the individuals in the circle can achieve more clarity on how to live intentionally in the world. It might be a circle of discernment to determine how best to welcome and empower the marginalized that comes through our door. Or a circle might be formed out of a need by a group for a safe place to strengthen each other as they have been buffeted by the world because of a difference between them and the majority. Whatever the intention – it is clearly stated so there is common understanding by the participants in the group.

The Participants Invitations to the group may be done by prayerfully considering the folks in the directory, posted on the bulletin board or advertised in the Crusader and neighborhood newspapers. Those invited might include only the cabinet or executive committee. How the invitations are done would depend on the intention of the circle.

The Explanation At the first meeting of the circle the caller gathers the group together with introductions, naming of the intention of the circle and an explanation of how circles work. If the form of meeting takes hold, this will take less time as folks become more familiar with the model.

The Center Something is placed in the center of the circle to acknowledge the center as the hub, the holding space of the energies flowing through it, the place where Spirit resides. This can be as simple as a Christ candle or symbols of the intention of the circle or perhaps each individual is invited to place something in the center to anchor them.

Meditation Following the initial welcome, someone will lead an exercise to help everyone leave the social arena of the everyday world and join the contemplative space around the circle. The 3D curriculum is an excellent resource for exercises useful during this time.

Greeting/Check-In The greeting/check-in is an opportunity for everyone around the circle to learn more about each other. This is not simply the “getting acquainted” exercises of many groups, but a time to help each one in the circle understand other participants more fully. This is helpful when opinions are shared. In a new group this may be a brief introduction. In ongoing groups it might be a time for folks to share

anecdotal information, offer a social comment or simply to say again why they are in the group – reaffirming their commitment.

Discussion/Agenda Because there is no one leader in the group but a group of leaders, the discussion/agenda is agreed upon by the group. This is generally set up at each meeting for the next session. It is essential to the functioning of the circle that leadership rotates – this does not mean that every one lead discussion, but it is important that everyone has the opportunity to contribute and that the same individual doesn't lead all discussion. Ideally, different people would begin different parts of the discussion. For example on the topic of globalization, someone might have an interest in the global workforce while another person may focus on trade agreements.

Checkout/Farewell Prior to ending the session, each person around the circle is given the opportunity to comment on the discussion, how they are feeling, what they would like to see happen next. The next session of the circle is planned and a ritual is followed to return the group back to social arena from which they came. This can be as simple as snuffing out the Christ candle as is done in Children's Worship & Wonder with the words "The light of Christ that was in one place at one time was changed to be in all places at all times." Or perhaps simply "Go in peace."

Covenants

In order for the circle to work, there are covenants to which the participants agree at the first meeting. The wording for these covenants was developed by Christina Baldwin and can be found on the Peer Spirit website:

<http://www.peerspirit.com/htmlpages/circlebasics.html>

- We will hold stories or personal material in confidentiality and honor other material, information or decisions with a level of confidentiality appropriate to the setting.
- We listen to each other with compassion and curiosity.
- We ask for what we need and offer what we can.
- We agree to employ a group guardian to watch our need, timing, and energy. We agree to pause at a signal, and to call for that signal when we feel the need to pause. (This signal may be a chime, bell or rattle, at which sound all action stops, people recenter, the guardian signals again and speaks to the need he/she felt in the group.)

A note about confidentiality: It is important within the community of the circle that participants feel safe to share their stories without fear that things will be shared outside the circle without their permission. It is also important to the larger community that the learnings of the circle be shared. When sharing the new wisdom gleaned from the circle, it is best to use I statements rather than share personal information belonging to someone else. Other issues with repeating anecdotes and others opinions is that in the retelling, the story is out of context. For example, if I say that Alex believes non-documented workers are criminals, it means something completely different if that is followed up with "and I

think we should work to do something to change that status.” Context is important. Confidentiality is important.

And so...

This is a premise document. It has been written because we could not find an existing curriculum that fit our needs for intentional discussion and movement into action. There is much more that can be written on the circles and how we might roll them out into the community. And it is time to move into action. We’ve been thinking and discussing for months. So here is the first shot at an explanation. Please give your honest feedback and where you see the tenuous parts are in extending an invitation such as this to members of our community and then to members of the larger community.

Short explanation:

We meet in Circles of Inquiry because we believe that the greatest wisdom lies in the center of the circle around which we gather with a myriad of stories, histories and perspectives. We gather with respect to those who have gathered around the circle with us and in respect of the topic to be discussed. Perhaps most importantly we invite God to the center of our circle – to lead us thru discernment to understanding. We understand that sincerely asked questions lead us on a path to new understanding and can teach those who are the recipients of the question as much as the answer will teach the one who asked. We also understand the circle is not about coming to the end of discussion with a single voice, but rather to give each soul information to consciously make their own decision and to leave the circle and move forward with new understanding.

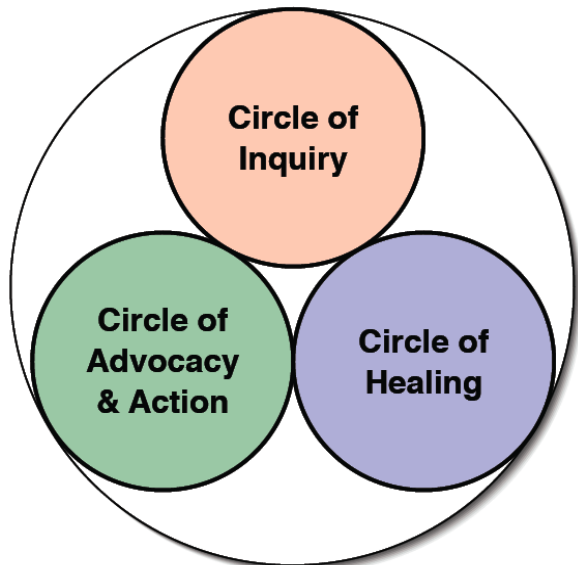


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For today, we will begin with the format for the Circle of Inquiry. We meet in Circles of Inquiry because we believe that the greatest wisdom lies in the center of the circle around which we gather with a myriad of stories, histories and