



In February 2010 Russel and Sarah Balenger founded the Rondo Circle of Peace. At the time, Russel was vice president of Amicus, which uses peace circles in its work. At home in Rondo, the Balengers worried about the frequent shootings there, especially after someone shot at their grandsons. Russel realized he must bring into circle the warring Rondo families, some of whose members were acting out in gangs.

The Balengers found a safe, neutral place in which to meet on Monday evenings at Unity Church. They knew that those who share a meal have a better chance of listening to each other than those who are hungry, so Sarah provided a buffet supper for the four Mondays that Russel asked the reluctant grandparents and parents to attend. Sarah's meal—most often something like roast chicken, a green salad, bread, fruit, a sweet—dissipated the anger of those first attending—enough for Russel to say they would talk in circle but not before making their own rules about how to do it.

The 10 rules they made govern the conversations of the circle to this day. Among them are these: No one speaks without holding the talking piece (usually a small stone, passed around the circle). Speak for no more than two minutes. Use "I" statements, not "you" statements. It's okay to pass. What's said here stays here. Don't leave the circle (angry) . . . Most important: Everyone in circle is equal.

As the circle-keeper, Russel typically reads the rules, does a short reading, and starts the conversation with a question. Participants in those first circles learned enough of and from each other to be able to say, "You're more like me than not like me, and I might learn something from you." And after four circles, they didn't want to stop.

The Balengers widened the circle, bringing in Russel's childhood friends, all successful businessmen (one a retired police officer). Eventually the Balengers brought in members of the St. Paul Police Force (a test of trust for all), parents of biracial or different-race children, ex-offenders, students, church members, visitors from afar, and regularly, residents of Boys' Totem Town—a locked facility for underage offenders. In 2013–14, the circle brought in members of the Hmong community to show and discuss the documentary *Open Season*, about the harassment of Chai Vang, his shooting of eight other hunters, and his trial. In the summer of 2014, 22 young leaders visiting the Humphrey School of Public Affairs from 21 countries in Africa attended three circle meetings. Four young human rights lawyers from Nicaragua and Paraguay came to another.

While the makeup of Rondo Circle (25 to 30 typically attend) changes from week to week, repeat attendance is the norm. The young men from Totem Town—black, Asian, Hispanic, Native American, and white—are encouraged to return before and after they are freed, and they have become the circle's focus: Tell us your story. How can we help you make better choices? Here are some alternatives. You can count on us. How can we help you succeed? Every new job, diploma/degree, apprenticeship, every college entrance, is celebrated. Many young men say the circle has provided the first opportunity for them to be heard, the first time anyone has wanted to hear from them, the first safe place to sit beside someone of a different race. Listened to and listening, they come to see themselves in a new way.

The Rondo Circle of Peace has since 2010 met more than 230 times with more than 5,550 sign-ins ranging from age 13 to 93. Most of the high-school members are back in school. Twenty attendees—youth, parents, and grandparents—are newly in college. Three more are working on master's degrees. Some are assisted by Will's Fund, donated by a friend to help with tuition and other expenses where the need is clear and the chance for success is high. One 60-year-old businessman is a new junior-high teacher.

The young men of the circle are finding better jobs. Circle members feel more secure, supported, and in control of their homes and lives. Each goes into his or her community—Rondo, Ramsey Hill, East and West St. Paul, Lowertown, Woodbury, Minneapolis, Eden Prairie . . . even to Africa and South America—with greater understanding and love, to immeasurable ripple effect. St. Paul Police Chief Tom Smith, a participant on several occasions, says gang violence in St. Paul is at an all-time low.

The Balengers, who are members of Unity Church, have continued the Rondo Circle five years as volunteers. While receiving some contributions from individuals and part of a yearly Sunday collection, they have paid for, prepared, and served most of the meals. They are determined to create an expanding circle of circles meeting in churches, schools, and community centers.

Unity Church–Unitarian supports the Circle Movement in many ways. The **Racial and Restorative Justice Community Outreach Ministry Team** also organizes volunteers to support the movement. In 2015 the Circle Movement received a grant from the St Paul Foundation to expand. This means widening the circle of volunteers too!

FAQ: How can you support the Peace Circle Movement?

- ***I have no time. How 'bout a donation?*** Cash donations, through Unity, supporting the costs of food and activities are welcome. (The grant covers just half the cost of food.)
- ***I'd like to support the youth who attend the Circle:*** A small group is planning and implement experiential learning activities. (Already planned are flying lessons!). Russel Balenger and Danny Givens lead the planning and welcome help in supporting their vision and wisdom: building dreams and offering hope.
- ***Can I attend?*** The Monday Circle is well established and the Thursday Hmong Women's and African Men's Circles are forming. The circle is there to support the youth, and the Balengers have built a supportive community including Rondo elders, and people of varying culture, race, age, and occupation, including police. It is best for the circles to include those who make a commitment to attend regularly. The future may see a request for Unity members to commit to attending one of the new circles.
- ***How can I help with the food ministry? Food support is much needed!*** A welcoming circle atmosphere at Circle starts with a homemade meal. You may sign up to bring a part of the meal. Go to [Unity Church Unitarian](#) website, tab; SERVICE LEARNING then VOLUNTEER CORNER.

We recommend using the password **Circle2015**

- Sign up to provide part of the meal: **more details on the Sign up Genius. Please contact us with questions.**
- Deliver to Unity Church Unitarian, 733 Portland Ave, St Paul, kitchen refrigerator marked **“Circle” by 4:30pm on the day of or the day before** the Circle.
- It will be heated or assembled for serving by 5:00 on the night of Circle.
- You may get reimbursed: save your receipt and put it in Lisa's mailbox with your name, address and phone number

Questions?

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