
FAMILY *CIRCLES*



Family Circles
are effective formats for dialogue,
particularly for addressing
difficult issues within a family.

Circles offer
a specific conversation process
and are facilitated
by an experienced Circlekeeper.

Circle Process

“Through the use of a family circle I was able to detangle the threads of a relationship in my family that had turned sour, scary, and uncomfortable, due to a conflict that escalated over some real estate my brother and I had purchased together. I came to the family circle very resentful over issues that I didn’t have courage to speak about directly with my beloved family member and adversary. The circle was a safe place to explore my relationship to a hurtful event and all the surprising ways I was stirred by it. There was enough time in between the sessions to let all of what went on in our family circle to settle in my consciousness. It allowed me to then talk about my experience of some specific painful and unresolved issues. The family circle simply let my family and me de-clutter our relationship so that we could move forward and allow each other to be our different selves together.”

- Family Circle Participant

Family Circles provide a way of talking together where everyone:

- is respected
- gets a chance to speak without interruption
- finds ways to tell his/her own story
- is heard
- is equal in authority to everyone else in the circle
- maintains confidentiality regarding what is said in circle

The circle process is based in Native American wisdom, relying on a talking piece, honest sharing and attentive listening. Trust and mutual respect, the cornerstones of circle process, seem to develop effortlessly early on, allowing participants to feel safe to speak their truth and to hear and be open to understanding perspectives different than their own.

Using the Peacemaking Circle model, Family Circles can be useful when families experience disagreement, need to make a decision together, are concerned about the behavior of a family member, want to work together as a team, want to learn from each other, or want to explore a topic they think will be difficult to talk about. Circles can help people in relationship move forward from “stuck” places that may have also housed anger, resentments, or even estrangement among family members.

Family Circles at Unity

Unity’s Restorative Justice Ministry Team has supported use of Peacemaking Circles primarily within the criminal justice system, offering restorative justice as an alternative to punitive consequences. This team has also supported and sometimes facilitated circles within and outside the congregation for a variety of purposes, including circle conversations in educational, workplace and other communities.

Some Unity members have used Family Circles to address differences within their own families. They found the process to be so effective at resolving entrenched problems that they determined to find a way for other families to have access to the circle approach. The Peacemaking Circle process, distinctly different from therapy, counseling, or conflict resolution mediation, has not previously been formally structured and made accessible for use by families. A group of Unity members and friends formed around this initiative, and the Unity Church Executive Team agreed to a pilot program by which Family Circles are made available to members of the congregation. If Family Circles effectively respond to a need and if program evaluation at the end of a period of time suggests that there would be value in sharing this process, access to Family Circles will be expanded beyond Unity.

How It Works

If you wish to consider calling a Family Circle, start by filling out a Family Circle Request Form included in this packet, or available at Unity’s literature table, downloadable from the Restorative Justice Ministry Team page on the church website, UnityUnitarian.org, or from the website familycircles.us. The completed form can be emailed to Request@familycircles.us or sent to Unity Church Unitarian to the attention of Janne Eller-Isaacs, who will forward the request. A Family Circle coordinator would respond to the submitted request form by phone within 10 days. She will talk more with you about why you wish to call a circle, what kind of results you hope for, and who might be included in the circle. If you decide to call a Family Circle, the coordinator would put you in contact with a Circlekeeper who would follow up with you. The Circlekeeper will interview all family circle participants before a circle date is set. Interviews give the participants a chance to meet the Circlekeeper, and start to acquaint the Circlekeeper with participants and thoughts and feelings they may bring to the circle.

The circle can take place in a home setting, at Unity, or at another location such as a meeting room in a public library. There will be two Circlekeepers, or an experienced Circlekeeper and a Family Circlekeeper-in-training. It might be requested that participants bring certain items, or reflect on a particular question before coming into circle. The circle session might last two to three hours, with participants passing a talking piece and responding to questions.

It is unlikely that the number of circle meetings will be determined before the first circle gathering occurs. Some circles are complete after one or two sessions, some will require several meetings. Fees related to the circle will be arranged with the circlekeeper, using a sliding fee scale.

The circlekeeper will equip the family to continue to use the circle process on their own after concluding the formal circle process.

FAQs

How do I know if I should call a Family Circle?

Family Circles are useful for two very different contexts -

- 1) difficult conversations or
- 2) strengthening family relationships.

Regarding difficult conversations, a Family Circle could be helpful if a family

- has difficulty communicating
- experiences frequent conflict that does not get resolved
- avoids touchy topics
- needs to make difficult decisions that bring up strong emotions

Regarding strengthening family relationships, a Family Circle could be beneficial if a family

- desires deeper conversations than normally occur
- wants to make sure that all family members feel honored and heard
- wishes to honor a particular family member or celebrate a family occasion of importance

What kind of results can I expect from a Family Circle?

Native peoples around the world have used the wisdom of the circle for centuries. It was used successfully to find consensus for all manner of problems and disputes in their communities.

Likewise the circle has been used in our communities in many ways in recent years. Many schools now use Peace circles to work thru problems between children; these circles eventually are often run by the children themselves when they learn the process. The circle is being used in the criminal justice system to bring community together after a crime has been committed. Circles have been used at Unity Unitarian to gather neighbors to discuss contentious issues, by congregants to repair relationships, by outreach teams to tackle tough questions, and finally by families wanting a way to find consensus where there was little or none before.

While the circle is not guaranteed to solve every problem immediately it continues to be a method where things can be discussed safely, deep discussion of issues comes naturally, everyone who has a stake in the problem gets heard, and solutions come from consensus.

How do you define 'family'?

Family is broadly defined as those people living together regardless of presence or absence of children and regardless of sexual orientation. It is defined by love not by contract. Although circles work best when all "family" members are involved the circle keeper will help those involved discover what is needed to make a Family Circle work for them.

Who can request a Family Circle? (Does it need to be an adult?)

While circles will generally be requested by adults a child can request a circle. The circle keeper will then work with the family to discern if a Circle is appropriate.

Who at Unity will know about my Family Circle?

Members of the Restorative Justice Outreach Team are sponsoring this pilot project at Unity Unitarian, supported by a nationally respected leader in the Circle Process, Kay Pranis. The team will know how many Family Circles are happening but will not know who in particular has requested or used the circle.

Who is the Family Circle Coordinator?

The Family Circle Coordinator is the person who will receive the Family Circle Request Form when it is submitted. She will respond to the request by contacting the submitter and answering any initial questions and will contact a Circlekeeper to start the circle preparation. Unity members Laurel Lein and Maura Williams currently share the role of Family Circle Coordinator.

How can I be sure that my family matters are held in confidence?

Family Circle Coordinators respect the privacy of those who request Family Circles and will share request materials only with the designated Circlekeeper. The Circlekeeper will work with the circle members to create a safe space for all involved. One of the key elements of the circle process is that “what is said in the circle stays in the circle.” It is one of the guidelines agreed upon by consensus once the circle has begun. The Circlekeeper is bound by the guidelines accepted by the group. Only the circle, with everyone’s agreement can make or change these guidelines.

What is a Talking Piece?

The Talking Piece is an object that is passed around the circle in an orderly fashion. It can be a rock, a feather, or some other object that holds significance for the Circlekeeper or the family. Whoever has the Talking Piece is the person who may speak. All others are required to listen, waiting their turn to hold the Talking Piece and share their truth.

What is the length of the Family Circle?

The Family Circle will meet at least once. Additional Circle meetings will be decided on by the family before the close of the current meeting. Some circle issues can be handled with one circle; other issues may take several meetings.

Circle Keepers

What is the role of the Circle Keeper?

The Circle Keeper facilitates the process of creating a safe space for each participant to speak and be heard. The Keeper does that by interviewing each participant before the first circle to understand each person’s perspective. In the circle the Keeper guides the family in developing their own values and guidelines that govern the process. Then the Keeper monitors the quality of the dialog to ensure that the conversation is respectful to all participants and that all voices are heard. The Keeper does not advise or suggest solutions. The Keeper supports the family in having whatever conversation they need to have in a respectful way.

What kind of qualifications does a Circle Keeper have?

The Circle Keepers participating in this project have all been through numerous trainings and have facilitated a large number of circles. In fact all of the current Keepers in the roster are themselves trainers in the circle process. All of the Keepers have specific experience facilitating circles with families.

Circle Keepers



Gwen Chandler-Rhivers

Gwen is an international Speaker and Leader in Peacemaking Circles as both Keeper and trainer. She has extensive experience with community development, community organizing, social services, housing development, the criminal justice system and courts (especially as they impact People of Color), diversity training, and intentional dialogues on values, race, and culture.

Gwen received her first Circle training in Yukon with First Nation Circle trainers Harold Gatensby and Phil Gatensby in 1997. She served as the Director and Coordinator of the Frogtown-Summit University Community Circle Initiative for many years. The Science Museum of Minnesota hired her to hold a series of Circles during their groundbreaking exhibit on “Race” in 2007, and she has continued to be invited to hold Circles in the different cities where the Race Exhibit has traveled since. Gwen has also been invited to hold a workshop on Circles at Harvard University.



Alice Lynch

Alice O. Lynch is a native of Brooklyn, New York. She received her Masters of Social Services in Community Development and Planning in 1974 from Bryn Mawr College Graduate School of Social Work and Social Research in Bryn Mawr, PA and her Bachelor of Science in Sociology in 1972 from Delaware State University, Dover, Delaware. She is presently working on her Ph.D. in Public Policy at Walden University.

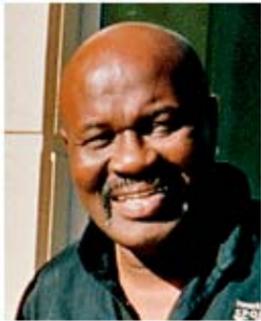
Since 2007 she has served as the Circle of Parents Metro Coordinator, where she provides support to organizations and groups that are interested in the development of mutual self-help support groups for parents. Alice has been the Executive Director of Black, Indian, Hispanic and Asian Women in Action (BIHA) and also co-chair of the Women of Color Network Advisory Committee. She has conducted over 1000 trainings on domestic violence, sexual assault, child abuse, chemical dependency, and HIV/AIDS, looking specifically at how these issues impact communities of color. Since 1997, Alice has worked to establish restorative justice programs in her own community and across the nation. She has been the recipient of numerous awards.



Jamie Williams

Jamie Williams is a Restorative Justice/Practices/Measures Consultant, Trainer, Teacher and Circle Keeper. Her past experience includes: Restorative Justice Coordinator of Bayfield School, Liaison for the Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Early Childhood Center, Amicus Radius (juvenile girls Restorative program) Amicus MNCOSA (Circles of Support and Accountability / re-entry services for adult males who have committed sex offenses), Minnesota Department of Corrections VOCARE program, Coordinator for the Seward Neighborhood Restorative Justice Initiative. She holds a BA from Metropolitan State University in Human Services: Counseling and Intervention and a MA Degree from St. Mary's University in Human Development: Restorative Justice / Measures /Circle Process.

Jamie received training in Family Group Conferencing, Victim Offender Mediation and has extensive training in Peacemaking Circle Process including Nares Mountain Wilderness Camp in the Yukon Territory. She has taught Peacemaking Circle Process to educators and community activists for the past twelve years in many schools and communities locally, nationally.



Oscar Reed

Oscar is currently the Multi-Cultural Director at St. Louis Park High School. His "Boys to Men" Circle has been in existence over 8 years. Oscar's mission is "to help save our children one child at a time." Oscar is a former Minnesota Viking who played with as much passion as he now serves people.

After his football career he became a business owner, craftsman and community youth advocate. He was appointed by the city of Minneapolis to the position of Youth Programs Director/Coordinator where he developed, implemented and directed programs for youth and families in Minneapolis Public Housing Authority for fifteen years. He is co-founder of "Life's Missing Link Inc.", a non-profit youth and family service agency in Minneapolis where he was Director of the Community Empowerment and Prevention Program. Oscar has dedicated the past twenty five years of his life to youth;primarily low-income, challenged youth and families in Minneapolis' inner city.



Kris Miner

Kris Miner embraced the Circle process while employed with AMICUS, working with gender specific groups and providing Circles in juvenile detention. She has been executive director of the St. Croix Valley Restorative Justice Program since 2005. Kris uses Circle in a variety of settings, from elementary schools to prisons. She provides training on use of Circles in schools. Kris has a Masters in Counseling from South Dakota State University.

Fees

A sliding scale of fees is based on ability to pay. If payment for circle(s) is financially challenging, we will explore options so that no one need be turned away because of cost.

For 1 - 4 circles: \$75 - \$150 per circle For circles 5 and beyond: \$50 - \$100 per circle

After speaking with the circlekeeper and agreeing to convene a circle, a non-refundable fee of \$50 will be paid to the Keeper before (s)he starts interviewing circle participants. This \$50 is applicable to payment for the initial circle. The Keeper will provide an address to mail the check for this fee, or request that you send it c/o Unity Church Unitarian, made out payable to him/her.

These charges are based on the following assumptions:

- The fee includes preparation time which could involve interviews of some or all circle participants before convening in circle
- Circles will normally be between 2 and 3 hours, most families will meet in circle at least 2x

If a circle is very complicated and requires two experienced keepers the fee is: \$100 - \$150 per circle.

If there is a request and some preparation by the keeper and then participants do not show up for a scheduled circle, there is a fee of \$25. If that happens twice the fee is \$50 and the family must re-apply.

Family Circle Stories

The Gift of Circle

This story was shared by Cindy Zetah and is published here with her permission.

For the holidays this year, my nieces and nephews - who normally exchange gifts - decided instead to donate their gift money to a charity. A rather huge step for a bunch of teenagers and college kids. The kids ended up donating over a hundred dollars to Hands of Hope, an organization for battered women and children. They had no expectations of gifts at our extended family gathering. Just being together was what was most important to them.

We gathered for our extended family holiday celebration, as usual, on New Year's Eve. Four of my brothers, two sisters and all of our kids for a grand total of twenty two individuals. After

presenting my mother, “Grandma,” with a new table top keyboard, a few gifts managed to find their way into the room. Boxes of candy were presented by some, baskets or books from another. Tape measures for all of the guys from the carpenter. I, on the other hand, had thought we had agreed “no gifts” and stuck to it. I sat there, watching those who just couldn’t let gifts “go” and, at that moment, decided to give them a gift of my own.

“Grandma” finished her rendition of “The Entertainer” on her new keyboard, and I asked the family to be seated so I could present my gift to them. We were already in somewhat of a circle, so the space was set. I shared with my brothers, sisters, mother and all of our kids what the staff at MCF Moose Lake have been attempting with the CRI initiative - to improve communication, build relationship, and change culture.

I explained a circle, and it’s intent, and asked permission to share this “gift of communication” with them. Rather timidly my family agreed. I chose for a “talking piece” a basket that I had just received for the cabin, and suggested that when they see that basket at the cabin, they will think of all of the things we shared in this circle during the holidays.

My question to my family was “what in the past year has touched you” and “what do you look forward to in the next year.” The honesty of emotions presented, and the depth to which they went surprised even me. A death in the family, loneliness at college, elation at a scholarship, the loss of a job, service in Iraq, thankfulness for a promotion and many more memories from the past year were shared. Looking forward to being with family, vacations, being with cousins, having loved ones home from service were hopes for the future. It’s amazing how much we miss throughout the year as we each hurry through our busy lives, and how truly vital communication is to being in touch with those who mean so much.

I reluctantly ended the circle after three passes of the talking piece, but further discussion of the content went on throughout the evening. Family members tearfully thanked me for this “gift,” and look forward to doing it again.

Keeping in touch, communicating, through good and bad, is vital - to all of us, no matter where we work, but it is especially vital.... to family.

Strengthening Family Communications

This is an edited version of a paper Adam Wright wrote for a class at Guelph University, Guelph, ON. As part of the class Adam attended a circle training. This is a description of his first circle facilitation. Used with permission.

Throughout the circle training weekend, the necessity for effective communication was reinforced in positive ways. This focus on effective communication highlighted areas in my personal life

where communication is lacking. As a result, I decided that facilitating a circle with my family would ultimately be a very positive and rewarding experience for all involved.

The purpose of the circle is to create more open pathways of communication within the family, which is especially important with so many changes occurring over the past five years.

I created a plan for the circle as follows:

- I. Introduction - Welcome everyone and open the circle with a reflective reading most likely a scripture verse. Introduce the talking piece and familiarize everyone with the guidelines of the circle process including active listening, ability to pass talking piece, and the intention of the circle.
- II. Discuss what values are needed to engender effective communication and then use these shared values as guiding principles of the circle.
- III. Values Question - What family values do you bring with you when dealing with the outside world? Once values have been highlighted add these to the values outlined in the guiding principles list.
- IV. Issue Question #1 - What changes are on your horizon? What excites/ challenges you about these changes?
- V. Issue Question #2 - What decisions or changes in your life in the past 5 years do you think have had the most impact on the family?
- VI. Follow up round of discussion - Provide everyone an opportunity to respond to certain topics or issues that have arisen throughout the course of the night, in particular discuss how people’s decisions have affected us.
- VII. Pre-amble to Closing Ceremony - Highlight shared values and thank everyone for their participation in the circle.
- VIII. Closing Ceremony - Sister and Brother In-law end the circle with prayer.

In anticipation of the circle, I talked with family members who I wanted to participate in the circle. In these talks I gave them a brief synopsis of the circle process and asked whether or not they would want to participate. Everyone that I asked agreed to participate although some members of the family showed a bit of reluctance.

As people’s schedules around the Christmas holidays are usually quite hectic, this year was no different. Resulting from certain scheduling conflicts and other factors, I was unable to proceed with a two part circle process that would have taken roughly the better part of 4 hours. Instead I chose to go with a circle itinerary that was aiming for a two hour time frame. I had a suspicion that although we had originally agreed to a two hour session, I knew my family would want to take the time needed to have a meaningful discussion.

In total seven people participated in the dialogue circle which is to say that all seven adult members of my immediate family took part. After I introduced the circle process and the general principles of the process, each person took a piece of paper and wrote down one value or guiding principle needed for effective communication. Once this was done we went around the circle allowing time for each person to explain why they chose that particular value, and then placed it on the coffee table for all to see. The values written down were; truth, authenticity, compassion, respect, safety / honesty, transparency, pain. Although it was mentioned by Kay in training that there should be nothing in the middle of the circle, the coffee table was a comfortable item in the room and moving it would have brought a sense of awkwardness to the conversation.

After this we then moved on to discuss the family values we bring with us in dealing with the outside world. The intent of this was to reinforce our shared values as well as provide an alternative way of highlighting shared values within the group. For the most part people reiterated already highlighted values with people borrowing from each other. This exercise was really effective at highlighting our interconnected beliefs and laid the groundwork for the next two issue questions which required a safe and cohesive space in order for issues to be brought forth.

Throughout the issue questions each person had the opportunity to tell the other members of the family some of the things they are struggling with in their personal journeys as well as talk about their role in the family. This was the most extensive portion of the dialogue circle taking about two hours with the introduction and closing segments taking about one hour. Although we had agreed to take about two hours at the beginning of the circle it was interesting to note that even though we were heading into the early hours of the morning, all participants wanted to spend the time needed to discuss matters of such importance (my suspicions were right). As a result we were able to fully explore the topics without having to truncate meaningful discussions. At the end of the first issue question I added the value of courage to the coffee table as people's honesty and transparency about intimate and personal issues was evident.

Before I introduced the second issue question somebody asked if we could respond to things brought up in previous rounds (up to this point in the circle we had only discussed our personal actions). At this moment I recognized the need for people to be able to respond to certain issues that pertain to them. I was somewhat worried but in spite of this I agreed that we should have a chance to respond and reinforced that comments should avoid negative connotations and reinforced the need for compassion (one of the guiding values). My thinking was that if this is truly to be a meaningful process people need to know how others are viewing their actions.

After the second issue was discussed we then went around the circle and discussed how other people's decisions have affected us. As mentioned before I reinforced the need for everyone to be considerate in their approach. Surprisingly this segment of the circle took an unexpected turn. While I was anticipating a certain level of uneasiness within the group due to people pointing out

how others actions have affected them, this was not so. In fact, many people in the group used this time to respond to each person in the group individually and point out how they have affected their lives in a positive way and how much they mean to them. While some used the time to highlight areas of concern these issues were brought forth in a sensitive manner and were compassionate in nature. Once the circle went around once I offered another round with a couple more individuals responding to certain things that they had written down over the course of the evening.

Once this was finished we all laughed at how much we cried and opened up emotionally. I then asked my sister and brother-in-law to lead us in a closing prayer.

After the circle was finished my parents went to bed while my sisters and brother's in-law each had discussions about some of the topics brought forth that night. During this time I reflected and wrote down some notes. Below I have copied some of these observations.

Notes -

Family's Reflections

- Several members of the family commented how the circle process opened new lines of communication. i.e. "Momentous change in the way we approach communication".
- The circle allowed us to dispel assumed truths that were created through poor communication and replace these with known truths.
- No moments of contention but rather moments of pain that ended in bonding, "when we cry together we grow together".
- The talking piece was referred to as 'the crying piece', this statement reinforces the emotional gravity of the circle as well the power of open and honest communication.
- Some members mentioned that they were skeptical going into the process but in the end found the circle to be a rewarding experience and would like to share it with others in the extended family including children.

Personal Reflections

- Overall I would say that the dialogue circle was tremendously successful with each member of the family commenting on how enriching the experience was and how it has helped open lines of communication about important matters. I think much of this success is due to the shared values of the family and the desire of all participants to fully engage in the process.
- The circle was a great opportunity to officially welcome new members into the family as my sister married her husband this past summer.
- After the circle ended I highlighted that while at times it seems difficult for us to talk to each other about important issues, we need to understand that the root of any of these discussions is a mutual love and respect. While initially we might react in a defensive manner we need to be able to hear how people are affected by our actions and understand that we are interdependent parts of a larger whole.

Conclusion

As mentioned previously I regarded this circle to be extremely successful as it accomplished exactly what it set out to; create open lines of communication within my family about important issues in our lives. Resulting from the circle, my visit back home this Christmas was one of the most rewarding times in my life and undoubtedly has prompted many changes in the way my family communicates and relates to each other. I want to personally thank you Wayne (Adam's professor) for introducing this process to me and my family. I am excited to talk to you in person about my circle as then I can provide more details about some of the intricacies that are difficult to explain in text. Without a doubt I will use the circle process again with my family as we continue to change, and cope with these changes.

