



In February 2010 Russel and Sarah Balenger founded the Rondo Circle of Peace, now The Circle of Peace Movement (TCOPM). At the time, Russel was vice president of Amicus, which uses peace circles in its work. The Balengers worried about the frequent shootings in their neighborhood, 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–Unitarian. They knew that those sharing a meal can listen to each other better than those who are hungry, so Sarah provided supper for the four Mondays Russel asked the reluctant grandparents and parents to meet. The meal—chicken, salad, bread, fruit, a sweet—eased the anger of those attending, enough for Russel to say they would talk in circle and make their own rules about how to do it.

The 10 rules they made govern the circle conversations circle to this day. Among them are these: No one speaks without holding the talking piece (often 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. Early participants learned enough of and from each other to say, “You’re more like me than not like me. I might learn something from you.” After four circles, they didn’t want to stop.

The Balengers widened the circle, bringing in many of Russel’s childhood friends, all successful businessmen (one a retired police officer, one now a teacher). Eventually he 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 residents of Boys Totem Town—a locked facility for underage offenders. In 2013–14, the circle brought in members of the Hmong community to discuss the documentary *Open Season*, about the harassment of Chai Vang, his shooting of other hunters and trial. In the summer 2014, 22 young leaders visiting the Humphrey School of Public Affairs from African countries first attended. Four Nicaraguan and Paraguayan human rights lawyers visited too.

While the makeup of the Community Circle of Peace (25 to 40 typically attend) changes from week to week, repeat attendance is the norm. The young men from Totem Town—black, Asian, Hispanic, Native American—are encouraged to return after they are freed, and they are the circle’s focus: Tell us your story. How can we help you make better choices? Here are some alternatives. How can we help you succeed? Every new job, diploma/degree, apprenticeship, every college entrance, is celebrated. Many young men say the circle provides their first chance to be heard, the first safe

place to sit beside someone of another race. Listened to and listening, they come to see themselves in a new way.

The Community Circle has met 350+ times as of July 2017, with participants ranging from age 13 to 93. Most of the high-schoolers are back in school. More than 20 participants—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. Retired St. Paul Police Chief Tom Smith, an occasional participant, says gang violence in St. Paul is at an all-time low. He presented the Balengers with his highest Chief's Award before leaving office

The Balengers, who are members of Unity Church, have continued this circle into its seventh year as volunteers. While receiving some contributions from small grants, individuals, and part of a yearly Sunday collection, they initially paid for and still prepare and serve 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 of Peace Movement (TCOPM) in many ways. Its **Racial and Restorative Justice Outreach Ministry Team** organizes volunteers to support the movement.

FAQ: How can I support The Circle of Peace Movement?

- ***I have no time. How 'bout a donation?*** Cash and food donations, through Unity Church–Unitarian, support the costs of food/youth activities and are welcome.
- ***How do I support the youth who attend the Circle of Peace?*** A small group is planning and implement experiential learning activities, such a flight in single-engine plane. Russel Balenger leads the planning and welcomes help in offering hope and supporting the teenagers' dreams.
- ***Can I attend?*** Everyone is welcome at the Monday Community Circle of Peace. Come between 5:15 and 5:30 PM and stay until the meeting ends around 7:00. The circle includes people of varying culture, race, age, and occupation.
- ***How can I help with the food ministry?*** A welcoming atmosphere starts with a home-cooked meal. Food/prep donations and meal prep assistance and coordination are much needed. You may sign up to help at unityunitarian.org **Tab SERVICE LEARNING Tab VOLUNTEER CORNER** or under the Volunteer tab at tcopm.org. **Further details are provided on the SignUp Genius site:**
<http://www.signupgenius.com/go/20f0845aaae2baaf85-circle>.

Questions?

Contacts: Ellen Green (Monday meals coordinator) at 651-224-1403 or ebgedit@gmail.com

Regarding TCOPM: Russel Balenger at 651-387-7731 or russel@tcopm.org