

# PART 1 : An Introduction to the Restorative Justice Circle

participant handout

**PURPOSE:** To provide a practical tool for having discussions on issues of race, gender, and other challenging topics in our neighborhoods and church communities.

## **Framing Quotes & Scriptures:**

The hand of the Lord was on me and he brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and set me in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. - Ezekiel 37:1-3

“I am drawn to the way that before God begins any work of resurrection, God wants the prophet to take time to see the profound severity of the situation...God wants Ezekiel to hear the sound of the valley... I believe that it suggests that there is no way for the prophet to move quickly to speaking resurrection if he wasn't absolutely aware of the extent of the peril in the valley. Perhaps he is witnessing to us that often, we want to move too quickly to healing, too quickly to restoration, too quickly to liberation and deliverance without taking the necessary time to survey the real condition of our own bones.” - Rev. Neichelle Guidry (an African-American Reverend at Trinity UCC in Chicago, IL, founder of shepreaches) from her book *Curating a World: sermon words from a young woman who preaches*

That's what we are practicing with restorative justice circles. We are taking time to survey the **real condition of our bones**, to fully listen to one another, to notice our emotional, physical, and intellectual responses without immediately jumping to responding, fixing, or doing things. This is a practice of **clarity, lament, and compassion**.

**History of Restorative/Transformative Justice (in a Nutshell):** Mainly, restorative justice practices were a response to situations where direct harm was done to one party by another party as a way to decide how to move forward on a path towards reconciliation. “Restorative justice is an approach to justice that focuses on the needs of the victims and the offenders, as well as involving the community” (Wikipedia). It brings all stakeholders to the table to come to a consensus-driven decision or understanding.

## **Examples of restorative/transformative justice practices in history:**

- Truth & Reconciliation Project in response to the Greensboro Massacre of 1979, NC.
- Truth & Reconciliation Commission in response to South African apartheid.

Cited: *The History of Restorative Justice* by Elmer Weitekamp (1999)

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# PART 2: How to Facilitate a Circle

## participant handout

**Why a circle?** When we sit in a circle we experience a stronger sense of community. Every person in the circle shares responsibility for its functioning. Circle culture is more “yes-and” than “either-or.” Yes, there is a leader, and each person takes the lead in turn, each time it is their turn to speak. Yes, some guidelines are given and the group makes its own agreements. Decisions are made, but by consensus of the whole group, and sometimes this means decisions come slowly or take unexpected forms. Thus, one of the main purposes of circle dialogue is building community. Another purpose is supporting the kinds of honest, authentic dialogue that is necessary to effectively respond to challenging relational dynamics, issues, and circumstances.

### **Here are some common ways circles are and can be used in your community:**

- Community building and maintaining
- Discussion about complicated or challenging situations and issues
- Conflict resolution
- Consensus-based decision-making

**A Talking Piece:** A talking piece is used frequently during circle. It can be anything that is easily passed from one person to another. Beautiful objects found in nature make great talking pieces. You may need to remind people to respect the talking piece by giving the person who is holding it their full attention.

**Prompts For Restorative Dialogue:** High quality prompts are questions that give the circle its energy and focus. The circle keeper asks a question and invites everyone on the circle to respond (including the circle keeper).

- **Check-in questions** are proactive and are about building and maintaining community. Some prompts are about responding to specific challenges.
- **Restorative questions** are a sequence of prompts that guide dialogues leading to understanding the consequences of harmful behaviors, and agreements about how to repair those harms.
- **Closure questions** invite reflection on what has happened in the circle.

# PART 2: How to Facilitate a Circle cont.

## High quality prompts have these characteristics:

- They are relevant: questions about something that is real and meaningful to the lives of students.
- Often a high quality prompt gives voice to existing unspoken questions: “What direct experience have you had with prejudice?” “How are our churches doing with equally identifying men and women as potential leaders, pastors, church planters” are examples of questions that are implicit in many people’s minds, but is perhaps rarely discussed openly.
- Simple and clear language is used.
- They are open-ended: not yes-or-no questions, but worded in a way that invites deeper inquiry.
- They are about inquiry, not advocacy; discovery, not teaching facts or proving a point. Thus, a prompt framed as “Why is it always best to be polite?” may be helpful, but it also assumes its own conclusion; you may as well say, “It’s best to be polite. Tell me why.” It might be more interesting to ask, “What makes relationships work out well?” They invite deeper follow-up questions.
- Other sample prompts:
  - What happened and what were you thinking at the time of the incident? What have you thought about since? Who has been affected by what happened and how? What about this has been hardest for you? What do you think needs to be done to make things as right as possible?

## Other ways to use circles:

- **Circle within a Circle:** this can be used to help folks explore and identify their own power and privilege. The leader identifies a physical, social, political, or economic advantage within the group that some people share. Those who share this advantage form the inner circle. Those who do not have this advantage sit in the outside circle and share their life experience of living without this advantage first. Then, the inner circle shares their experience of listening to the outer circle and what they learned.
- **Traditional Circle:** In a traditional restorative circle, people pass the talking piece as they each answer the same prompt. If you don’t have the talking piece, you are listening to the person holding it. This is an introductory circle that helps people learn to listen and not talk over each other.