



# Center for Restorative Justice & Peacemaking

An International Resource Center in Support of Restorative Justice Dialogue, Research and Training  
In Collaboration with the Restorative Justice Initiative, Marquette University Law School

## PEACEMAKING CIRCLES

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The purpose of peacemaking circles is to create a safe, nonjudgmental place to engage in a sharing of authentic personal reactions and feelings that are owned by each individual and acknowledged by others, related to a conflict, crisis, issue, or even to a reaction to a speaker or film. The circle process allows the opportunity for each person to speak, without interruptions from others.

Peacemaking circles, talking circles, or healing circles are deeply rooted in the traditional practices of the indigenous people of North America, as well as from other parts of the world. They are widely used among the First Nation people of Canada and the hundreds of tribes of Native Americans in the United States. The circle process establishes a very different style of communication than most from European traditions are familiar with. Rather than aggressive debate and challenging each other, often involving only a few more assertive individuals, the circle process establishes a safe nonhierarchical place in which all present have the opportunity to speak without interruptions. Rather than active verbal facilitation, communication is regulated through the circle keeper or facilitator by passing a talking piece (usually an object of special meaning or symbolism to the group). The talking piece fosters respectful listening and reflection in a safe setting. It prevents one-to-one debating or attacking or even one person dominating the conversation. After welcoming the participants, all of whom are sitting in a circle, the circle keeper will begin by having each person introduce him- or herself, followed by brief opening comments by the circle keeper about the purpose of the circle and the talking piece. Guidelines for communication are discussed and agreed upon. Typical guidelines include listen with respect, speak from the heart, give each person a chance to talk, allow one person to talk at a time when he or she has the talking piece, speak for yourself and not as the representative of any group, realize that it is okay to disagree, and no name-calling or attacking.

The circle keeper will begin the process by posing a question to reflect on, followed by other related questions. After each question, the talking piece is passed to the person on the left, clockwise. Only the person with the talking piece can speak. If others jump in with comments, the circle keeper reminds them of the ground rules and refocuses on the person with the talking piece. Participants are not required to speak: this requirement would create an unsafe, pressured tone to the circle. If someone feels unable to speak, he or she can simply pass the talking piece to the next person.

The circle process has been brought into European culture by many over the years, including community activists in the restorative justice movement and activists in the feminist movement, most notably Baldwin, author of *Calling the Circle, The First and Future Culture*, and Pranis, Stuart, and Wedge, authors of *Peacemaking Circles: From Crime to Community*. Peacemaking circles are increasingly being used to address conflicts in families, schools, workplaces, and communities. They are also used to address issues of violence, including both common assault and more severe violence.

### Further Readings

Baldwin, C. (1998). *Calling the circle: The first and future culture*. New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell.

Pranis, K. (2005). *The little book of circle process*. Intercourse, PA: Good Books.

Pranis, K., Stuart, B., & Wedge, M. (2003). *Peacemaking circles: From crime to community*. St. Paul, MN: Living Justice Press