

# For Beginning Courageous Conversations on Race

## Group and Purpose

The circle outline below was based on the first of five Racial Healing Circles (RHC) hosted at St. Joseph's Parish in Seattle (offered weekly). These mixed-race circles were convened following growing concern about racialized harm across the country and in the local neighborhood. The participants in the circle had already been engaging in varied avenues of learning and formation about the sin of racism within their respective groups. The participants for this circle were convened by the parish Deacon and Pastoral Associate at the parish. He invited six representatives from the Community Outreach Partners, Anti-racism Book Club, and St. Joseph School. There were 18 participants plus two circle keepers, 15 were White, 3 were People of Color.

The circle process was utilized because it provides a different way of talking about race and racism that is relational and proactive. The circle process taps into both ancient practices and modern processes to create trust and belonging. Racial Healing Circles work to help jettison beliefs in a hierarchy of human value and to harness the transformative power of authentic relationships that promote emotional healing within diverse communities. Healing racism is the only way to restore us to our full humanity. The circle brings us together to share our individual truths, histories, and stories.

Racial healing circles serve to reaffirm the humanity in all of us and to lift what unites us rather than what divides us; while discovering, respecting, and honoring the unique experiences of each person. Racism affects all of us where we live, learn, work and play. Racism can affect us both as individuals and within our systems and institutions. It affects our ability to know, relate to and value one another. Systemically, it can be one of the biggest obstacles to solving the challenges we face in our communities because it often keeps us apart.

Facing this reality, communities need tools to help heal from these effects. To heal means to restore to wholeness; to repair damage; and to set right. It is essential to pursue racial healing prior to doing change making work in a community. Because, before you can transform systems and structures, you must do the people-work first. Otherwise, the work is not sustainable. Participation in Racial Healing Circles plays a significant role in the transformation of communities and our nation.

*This sample circle outline was shared as part of Catholic Mobilizing Network's program, Conversations in Communion: Parish Dialogues for Connection and Understanding. You can learn more at [catholicmobilizing.org/conversations](https://catholicmobilizing.org/conversations).*

## Approach, Preparation, and Logistics

Several of the participants had prior experience with the circle process and/or had participated in circle training. A review of the essential elements was given as part of the introduction to the circle at the first gathering. The group of 18 participants was mixed in their racial identities. For the co-facilitators, one was African American and one was White. The circle keepers were non-parishioners, but local restorative justice/circle practitioners with experience in holding courageous conversations on race and racism and had an existing relationship with the parish and diocese.

Experience with facilitating conversations around race and racism should be a prerequisite for co-facilitators. They need a heightened awareness and analysis of how discussions around race and racism can be challenging and an emotional experience for some people which can dramatically affect the dynamics of the conversation. Most importantly, the facilitators should know how to manage these challenges. It is also important that the facilitators are racially diverse and can offer opportunities for participants to break into racial affinity groups to share their particular experiences.

This outline was the first of five conversations about race and racism. All of the circles met in-person, but co-facilitators acknowledge that this format can be adjusted to a virtual platform. The materials needed include: posters/poster paper, markers, paper plates, and handouts.

## A Note from CMN

*We include this outline as the first in a series to demonstrate the importance of beginning with intention. For additional support and formation in anti-racism for parish or ministry groups, check out [Crossroads Antiracism Organizing and Training](#).*

## Circle Outline

### Welcome

Now more than ever, we need to work toward racial healing. There is an urgent need to acknowledge our history of racism, boldly confront racism wherever it shows up, and address racism when it is witnessed. This will not happen until we engage in self-awareness and reflection as well as confront any personal racist attitudes and behaviors.

We are sharing a journey together by talking about race and exploring our relationship to it. Race has a huge presence in our society, but we have very few opportunities to talk with one another about what race means to each of us. It takes courage to talk about race in an honest and

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respectful way. This is a journey of courage. Thank you for bringing yourself in the best way you can.

## Opening Ceremony

“Looking deeply and introspectively at our own racial existence is a doorway to understanding the complexities of race in America. As we become personally aware of our own racialized existence, we can more deeply understand the racial experiences of others. Without doing this, we will continue to assess the racial experiences of others through our own distorted (and limited) lens.”

~*Courageous Conversations About Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools* (2006) by Glenn Singleton

## Check-In

Introduce yourself: What is your name and affiliation or role with the parish? Share one word that describes how you're feeling.

## Values

Instruct participants to write in one/two words their needs and contributions on the paper plate, then place the plate on the centerpiece.

1. What do you need from this circle to support your commitment to this racial healing circle?
2. What are you bringing to the circle that will support our quest for racial healing?

## Guidelines

Present “Four agreements of Courageous Conversation” and provide handout for review.

- Stay engaged
- Expect to experience discomfort
- Speak your truth and
- Expect and accept non-closure

As facilitator, add:

- Respect each other's privacy and honor confidentiality.

Ask if there is anything else that should be added, then establish consensus around these.

## Round One:

Why do we need to have conversations related to race or racism? Why is this important to you?

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## **Round Two:**

When did you first learn that “your” race mattered? How did you learn this lesson and why was it an important lesson for you to learn?

## **Round Three**

When are you most conscious of your race? Share an experience of being particularly conscious of your race.

## **Round Four**

What additional education, support, or formation does this group need to advance racial equity and integral human dignity? What can you do to start meaningful conversations about race and racism in your life?

## **Check Out**

Reflecting on our conversation tonight, how are you feeling as we close out this circle?

## **Closing Ceremony**

*“Turning To One Another” by Margaret Wheatley*

There is no power greater than a community discovering what it cares about.

Ask: “What’s possible?” not “What’s wrong?” Keep asking.

Notice what you care about. Assume that many others share your dreams.

Be brave enough to start a conversation that matters.

Talk to people you know.

Talk to people you don’t know.

Talk to people you never talk to.

Be intrigued by the differences you hear. Expect to be surprised.

Treasure curiosity more than certainty.

Invite-in everybody who cares to work on what’s possible.

Acknowledge that everyone is an expert about something.

Know that creative solutions come from new connections.

Remember, you don’t fear people whose story you know.

Real listening always brings people closer together.

Trust that meaningful conversations can change your world.

Rely on human goodness.

Stay together.

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## Follow Up and Reflective Evaluation

The primary purpose of the first circle of a five-part series was to build trusting relationships that are foundational for healing dialogues around race and racism to be productive. Each subsequent session was themed to give focus and attention to various aspects for racial healing (e.g., racial identity development, impacts of race and racism, implicit/unconscious racial bias, understanding racial privilege, and working toward racial truth and reconciliation). This series culminated with various groups within the parish developing action items to continue their work for racial justice throughout the St. Joseph Parish community. This series met once per week for five weeks and for convenience was a compressed version of a much longer series (6-8 weeks). It is recommended that a series of circles meet every 2-4 weeks versus every week. More time is recommended to reduce the intensity of the experience and allow more time for reflection between sessions.

The authors of this script wish to encourage those considering holding such a circle to be flexible and responsive to your context and the needs of the group. Consider including a brief reading or video for groups to watch/read together, spend time reflecting on in pairs, and then bring their reflections to the large group. Like all circles, one question may deserve a second “go around” of the circle before moving onto the next question. If a round or question takes longer than expected, do not rush through the other rounds, but rather ensure you make adequate time for closing and make a plan to reconvene.

## About the Circle Facilitators:

Pamela Taylor is Professor Emerita in the College of Education at Seattle University, a Jesuit Catholic University. Pamela has worked with many entities and initiatives affiliated with the Seattle Archdiocese. Andrew Prinzing is a member of Erie County Restorative Justice Coalition in Buffalo, NY and contributed to the development of this outline from his experience facilitating circle processes on race and racism in his parish and community.

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