

# For Celebrating

## Group and Purpose

This circle process was initially created for a group of ten young people participating in a college support program who had been meeting for approximately two years. The group was predominantly African American. Prior to this Celebration Circle, they had been meeting every Sunday for seven weeks using circle process.

Affiliated university staff asked Amber to co-facilitate a circle to celebrate the group's progress after a challenging period. Amber and her co-facilitator were invited because they were known for prior training in circle process and restorative justice practices.

Only weeks later, Amber welcomed her first child and recognized the ways that this same circle was wonderfully suited to support families welcoming a new child.

## Approach & Logistics

The circle process took place at their regular time and location of meeting: Sunday afternoons in a local Church. It lasted approximately an hour and a half.

Each facilitator bought items from their homes and backgrounds to contribute to the centerpiece and to be used as talking pieces. Amber brought small figurines from places she had visited while she worked internationally and talked about how these objects reminded her of the "village" she had cultivated over the years. Prior to the circle, each participant was invited to bring an instrument or a "tool" for celebration (hat, balloon, noisemaker, etc.).

With the help of a local musician and church leader, the circle included African drumming to make joyful rhythms between rounds. Their goal was to use music to demonstrate the strengthened bonds, individual gifts, and shared joy.

## Circle Outline

### Opening Ceremony

"Today we are here to celebrate \_\_\_\_\_. One of the most clear indicators of celebration is sound. We have claps, cheers, and shouts. There are moments when we cannot use sound to celebrate so let's open our space by sharing our gesture for celebration. For example, if I was trying to indicate celebration I might raise my hands in the air and wave them back and forth like

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this.” [Show arms waving] “On the count of three we will all begin showing our gesture of celebration,” [Allow for a few seconds of celebratory gestures and maybe make reference to the special details of the celebration. For example, if celebrating new parents, invite participants to make their gestures in the direction of the family...much like extending hands for a blessing.]

## **Check-In & Values**

“Please share your name, the value you bring to this space, and a brief explanation of your celebratory “tool”. After you share, please place your “tool” in the center of the circle so it can serve as part of our centerpiece. I will start to model.” [I model to help with timing and to clarify the question by giving an example]. “If you do not have your “tool,” please share about what you would have liked to bring.”

## **Guidelines**

This group used a set of agreements created in a prior meeting. If gathering for the first time as a group, Amber says “I would share a set of pre-created agreements. Then, I would ask if there was anything folks would like to add. I would conclude by asking for a visible or audible response to show consensus.”

## **Round One:**

“We want to call upon previous experiences of celebration to enrich this moment with our stories and memories. For this first round, please share about a time when you celebrated someone. What did it feel like, look like, sound like? Please tell the person’s connection to you, what you were celebrating.” [The goal with this question is to have someone call to mind a celebratory moment and connect with the energy of previous celebrations.]

## **Round Two:**

“Our celebrating is not limited to this time in circle, so let’s use our imaginations. When you think about celebrating this moment, what do you think we need in order to celebrate well? What do we NOT need?” [The point here is to both imagine something beyond what we can do in this moment AND create meaningful limitations/boundaries.]

## **Round Three:**

“In this final round, let’s aim our attention squarely at the progress (or person) we are celebrating. The goal of this gathering is to help one another know without a doubt that we SEE one another (or them). Use this final round to share hopes, wishes, and prayers for them. If you have been a witness to their hard work (or any other positive qualities), take this time to recall that moment and share it.”

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### **Check Out:**

“As you prepare to leave this space of celebration, please share a word or phrase about how you're feeling.”

### **Closing Ceremony:**

We are going from silence to sound. Please pick up your “tool” from the center and prepare to put it to use. There is a short reading that will conclude our time together and then I invite everyone to “make a joyful noise” in celebration of XYZ.

[If the celebration is for a growing family, I recommend a poem/blessing “Blessing for A Mother To Be” or “Blessing For A New Father” by John O’ Donohue from his book *To Bless the Space Between Us*.]

Invite everyone to make sounds of celebration as a final closing. It should be very much like the thunderous ovation at the conclusion of a graduation ceremony. Welcome raucous!

### **Outcomes & Learnings**

The circle process reminded all involved of the ways we live richer and more joy-filled lives when we stay connected to our community. The participants left the experience feeling energized (especially with the help of the drum circle). “It felt like a *kairos* moment.” Amber says, “They were given an opportunity to lean into the energy of the collective and they took it. It was such a sacred time.”

In hindsight, Amber says she might have allowed more time afterward for young people to informally linger and chat. It was apparent that they appreciated “time away” from the day to day activities that typically occupy their attention and energy. Amber noted that given the racial and cultural backgrounds of the students, it was significant that both facilitators were African American representing the ways in which community leaders of color are invested in supporting them. She said it also would have worked just as well if one facilitator was a person of color and one was not.

### **About the Circle Facilitator:**

Amber Herkey is an educator, ministry leader and new mom from South Bend, Indiana. She is a member of St. Augustine Parish and currently serves as Assistant Academic Advancement Director at the University of Notre Dame.

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