

# For Encounter Amidst Polarization

## Group and Purpose

In the fall of 2020, the University of San Diego (USD) Office of Ethical Development and Restorative Practices and its Center for Restorative Justice (CRJ) hosted a series of circle processes across their campus in preparation for the presidential election. The aim was to prepare student leaders to support peers in this national conversation. Prior to hosting these circles, USD had been holding community building circles broadly for student orientation and formation. They also employ circle process in student conduct. However, the process did not assume that all participants had previous experience with circle process.

## Approach, Preparation and Logistics

These 90 minute circles met virtually due to the pandemic. Circles were co-facilitated by campus staff and student leaders previously trained in circle process. The process was designed to accommodate approximately 12 people in each circle. Students were invited to sign up to participate and the virtual link was then shared. Existing networks were utilized to share the opportunity.

Planners reminded facilitators that the conversation can go into various different directions and that they were identified as a valuable co-facilitator due to your ability to navigate complex student situations.

By posing broad and thoughtful questions, you allow our student leaders to guide the conversation while not pointing the conversation to a particular end-point. You also have the ability to provide intentional and specific insight to their responses once they have shared.

Be flexible to the needs of the student leaders in your space. Lean on your co-facilitator as needed. You do not need to recite every question below, or even ask the questions exactly as scripted. Use your best judgment to adapt this script to your Zoom room.

In the Catholic tradition, participants and facilitators were mindful of the dignity of each individual. As facilitators invited participants to share their story and lived experience, the framework of embracing a diversity of ideas was ever-present. The importance of being in community is the framework upon which all members belong and are respected, regardless of differences in opinions and experiences.

*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).*

The campus-based Facilitator/Circle Keeper Training includes an overview of important facilitation techniques that are trauma-informed. For example, affirming but not questioning, or focusing on the intention of the story not the specifics of the experience. Additionally, planners incorporated the campus wellness team resources (counselor on call, counseling center, university ministers, etc.)

## Circle Outline

### Opening Ceremony

As students are joining your Zoom call, greet them and remind them of the expectations of their video being on, encourage them to use “Gallery View” to see all faces in the group. Invite participants to rename themselves to first name and role on campus (RA, Facilitator, Student, etc.)

Introduce yourself as the facilitator(s) and allow participants to verbally introduce themselves.

### Land Acknowledgement

“We want to acknowledge that the land on which USD is built is the traditional and unceded territory of the Kumeyaay Nation. We want to pay respect to the citizens of the Kumeyaay Nation, both past and present, and their continuing relationship to their ancestral lands.”

### Opening Quote

“When we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard or welcomed. But when we are silent, we are still afraid. So it is better to speak.” ~ Audre Lorde

### Check-In

This 90 minute circle will be focused on our lived experiences with the current election season. Political stress and unrest are present within the current state of our nation. As student leaders we are facilitating this space for you to support peers in this national conversation. In restorative practice, we want to be clear that this isn’t an ideological debate space, it is a reflection of your experiences. Additionally, we hope that what you take away from this conversation will also prepare you to engage and support our USD student community.

### Prompt

How are you feeling as you arrive to this circle/conversation?

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## Values

What is a core value you hold that helps you arrive as your best self?

## Guidelines

“In addition to sharing why we are in space together, it is important in any group to know what we can expect from each other. Here are some basic ground rules for engagement.”

- Speak from the heart
  - *Speak authentically, share from your perspective, and use centered and wise words when possible*
- Listen from the heart
  - *Listen for understanding, seek to hear others' perspectives, and be compassionate when listening*
- Speak spontaneously
  - *Speak what you are feeling in the moment, without worrying about finding the perfect words or the “correct answer.” This connects with speaking authentically.*
- Without feeling rushed, say just enough
  - *Give yourself the time you need to say what you need to say, while allowing time for others to speak as well.*
- Welcome and expect different and contradictory points of view
  - *Circles welcome multiple perspectives and experiences. We encourage those in the circle to engage with the multitude of perspectives offered in order to seek shared understanding rather than to engage in debate.*

“Are there any additional ground rules that should be considered for our time together? If you are good with what we have, please give me a thumbs up.” If there is not consensus, the facilitators would revisit the question of “are there any additional ground rules?”

The facilitators hold the responsibility to manage a circle that allows dialogue across differences. We have also used Brene Brown’s concept of “Brave Space”, challenging participants to be ready for challenging conversations and be brave in sharing their story while taking in the story of others.

## Round One:

### Introduce the concept of a talking piece:

- Explaining that it is a way to focus on listening.
- Describe the option to speak or pass at any point.
- Acknowledge that participants are having a range of experiences and we want to invite everyone to take care of themselves.

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- Explain that instead of a talking piece, we will have a speaking order posted in the chat. Reinforce that anyone may pass at any time.

### **Reminders about Self Care:**

- Circle practice is about sharing power which is grounded in equity.
- Additionally, please remember to prioritize your needs first, we want this to be a transformative experience, not a harmful one.
- If at any point you want to hold onto your power or not share, you can always choose to pass. This includes if your self-care needs to be mentally taking yourself out of the circle for your own wellbeing in order to ground yourself to return to be present.
- As a reminder, I'm going to place the information about resources available to support you during and after our time together.

**Prompt:** "Please re-introduce yourself and share what you are observing with regard to this 2020 election cycle."

**Transition after sharing:** "Thank you all for sharing, keep these thoughts in mind as we go deeper into our conversation."

### **Round Two:**

*"An authentic faith . . . always involves a deep desire to change the world, to transmit values, to leave this earth somehow better than we found it. We love this magnificent planet on which God has put us, and we love the human family which dwells here, with all its tragedies and struggles, its hopes and aspirations, its strengths and weaknesses. The earth is our common home and all of us are brothers and sisters. If indeed "the just ordering of society and of the state is a central responsibility of politics," the Church, "cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice." (Evangeli Gaudium, no. 183)*

"As Catholics, we are part of a community with a rich heritage that helps us consider the challenges in public life and contribute to greater justice and peace for all people."  
(<https://www.usccb.org/resources/forming-consciences-faithful-citizenship-pdf>)

What does a just community look and feel like to you? When have you experienced just community?

### **Round Three:**

All of us come with unique personal backgrounds and narratives, some of us are directly engaged in national politics and some of us are not. If comfortable, please speak to how the current election cycle has impacted you or your community(ies)? Remember that you are only asked to share what you are comfortable with sharing to this group.

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## Round Four:

“Thank you all for sharing your personal experiences. It isn’t always easy to share or express your values and how you have been impacted in spaces with those who have different experiences. As we think about this election and how polarizing it has become, what reactions (physical, emotional, spiritual) do you experience when someone presents a different ideology than you?”

**Transition after sharing:** “Thank you for sharing all of these extremely personal sides of your lived experiences.”

## Check Out:

As we close our time together, take a moment to reflect on any new insights you’ve gained and share one way that you can take care of yourself and your community(ies) during the election cycle.

## Closing Ceremony:

“Fortunately, there will always be people who have the grace and the ability to engage in reflective listening, to ask, “Richard, did I understand what you were saying?” and repeat back to me their perception of what I said. Normally then I can clarify, or perhaps admit that I have communicated poorly or am, in fact, incorrect. When we can listen and respond in that way, each person is treated with the respect and dignity they deserve as children of God. Each person feels heard, and misunderstandings are clarified compassionately.

Dalai Lama: “When you talk, you are only repeating what you already know. But if you listen, you may learn something new.” – Fr. Richard Rohr (

<https://cac.org/daily-meditations/compassionate-listening-2022-07-25/>)

“Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger.” - James 1:19

## Follow Up and Reflective Evaluation

Closing announcements included:

- If you have any questions about future sessions, or are needing any level of support with regard to the upcoming election, don’t hesitate to reach out.
- Also note that a student leader will be sending a follow up email to talk about your experience tonight.
- If this space has had a significant impact on you, please connect with one of us so that we can provide the proper resources and support for you.

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The experience reminded our team that our undergraduate students need more opportunities to share and be in Circle, but are also hesitant to engage in these processes.

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

This circle process was shared by Sean Horrigan, Mandy Womack, and Sheila McMahon from the University of San Diego's Center for Restorative Justice.

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