

# For Grappling with Injustice

## Group and Purpose

This circle was the first one offered as part of a new Restorative Practice ministry at Our Lady Queen of Peace Parish (OLQP) in Arlington, VA.

The 10 members of the newly formed Restorative Practice Ministry team knew each other previously through other parish groups. Prior to holding this circle, they had been meeting for about a year. After they participated in two days of training, they facilitated practice circles as a team, and then offered one pilot circle to a different ministry group.

The circle outlined below was offered to any member of the parish who wanted to gain an experience of circle process and discuss the impact of poverty on the faith community. Eleven parishioners participated in person in two concurrent circles. They were active parish members but had no prior circle process.

## Approach and Logistics

On multiple weekends leading up to the circle, the parish bulletin contained information about the circle, and the celebrant at each mass emphasized it in announcements at the end of mass. Paper flyers were also placed in several spaces where parishioners gather, and there were references on the parish website and Facebook page. The notices contained a link and a QR code to RSVP as well as the name of a contact for further information. In addition, each team member directly contacted 6 parishioners in order to extend a personal invitation with the latter effort being most effective.

We scheduled the circle for 2 hours, including a final 15-minute opportunity for immediate verbal feedback. In addition, we invited participants to arrive up to 30 minutes beforehand and offered them light snacks to mingle (but primarily to ensure that they arrived on time). We reserved a classroom in the ministry center with a partition to enable two concurrent groups to participate. In one of them, we set out the food. We decided to split into two concurrent groups to allow greater depth of sharing for participants. It also provided more members of the team the opportunity to practice their facilitation skills. In splitting the circles, we attempted to diversify by gender, race, and family connections.

A few days before the circle, we sent out a one-page summary of the circle process and expectations for participation, including the importance of values, guidelines and a talking piece. We emphasized the importance of experiencing the circle process more than analyzing it,

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but we agreed to address those kind of questions after the circle concluded. In pre-planning, the facilitators agreed that the questions could be different for each circle. Each of the circle co-facilitators developed their own talking points and prompts but with an intention to limit their remarks in order to complete the process on time.

Both circle centerpieces were colorful cloth laid over a raised round table to accommodate older participants who might feel uncomfortable reaching down to the floor. Each held a small LED-powered candle in the center. One circle used a traditional talking piece (with feathers and leather strings), about which the facilitator acknowledged its indigenous roots with gratitude to that tradition. The other circle offered several talking pieces from which circle participants could choose. They varied from a stone owl to a small stuffed guinea pig toy and a long stick with a red wooden heart attached. Participants did choose to “switch out” the talking piece in that circle.

## Circle Outline

### Opening Ceremony

Before moving into smaller groups, we welcomed the group and began together in one room with the following components:

### Opening Prayer

Prayer by Sheila Norris

Startle us, O Holy One, into a new mode of being, a letting go of fear and indifference, an embrace of brokenness and otherness.

Free us, O Answer to our Restlessness, from lukewarm spirits, false desires and empty pursuits.

Rouse us, O Breath of Life. Stir up new fire in our hearts, truth and love in our words, and clarity in our vision.

Restore us, O Spirit of Intimacy that we might claim our voice as your disciples and immerse ourselves in the business of unequivocal loving.

Recreate us, O Creator Spirit. Hover over the chaos of our world, our church, our souls and call forth from us new daring to be Christ for others.

Grant us, Lord God, a vision of your world as your love would have it:

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A world where the weak are protected, and none go hungry or poor;  
A world where the riches of creation are shared, and everyone can enjoy them;  
A world where different races and cultures live in harmony and mutual respect;  
A world where peace is built with justice, and justice is guided by love.  
Give us the inspiration and courage to build it, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

## **Land Acknowledgement**

What happened in the past shapes our present.  
Many harms – injustices – reverberate to this day.

To begin to repair those harms, we tell the truth,  
both about the harms, and  
about the people whose lives and contributions  
have been made less visible as a result.

Thus, we acknowledge that the land we are on here in Arlington  
was the homeland of the Nacotchtank people,  
who became part of the Piscataway nation.  
Billy Redwing Tayac was their most recent hereditary leader  
until his death in September 2021.

We also acknowledge that the prosperity of what we now know as Arlington  
was built in large measure on the stolen labor of people of African descent,  
including some five dozen who labored at Arlington House.

We remember in order to move forward.

(from Restorative Arlington's Land and Labor Acknowledgement)

Note—we suggest that, if actual tribal names are used, circle keepers prepare before reading the acknowledgement so that they fluidly pronounce the tribal names correctly.

## **Informational Video**

We shared a short video as a full group to allow the participants a commonly shared experience and focus for discussion. We introduced the video by saying:

Today's circle process is an invitation to take a deeper dive into what story poverty holds for us, not as a problem to solve, but how those stories form our understanding of ourselves and our world.

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Poverty is an immense and ancient global problem. It is both the cause and the product of fear, ignorance, violence, and suffering. There are many entry points to talking about poverty. We have chosen to begin today's conversations with income inequality, as a way to tap into our own lived experiences and stories of how wealth, or lack of wealth shaped and informed our perspectives on the world and our places in it.

This is a short video, and we would ask that after watching it, you move into your circles so that we can begin our conversation together.

The group watched this [6-minute video](#) on the theme of income inequality, then moved into two separate circles.

### Check-In

**Circle 1:** "What is your name? How long have you been a member of OLQP parish? And what is one thing about the parish that you appreciate?"

**Circle 2:** "What is your name? What is something a good friend might say about you?"

**Facilitator Note:** *Interestingly, this question put many in the group into a contemplative mood, with some responses being deeply reflective, and some more light-hearted, but brave: "I talk too much;" "I cry easily." It was a good reminder that even the most intentionally gentle queries can elicit vulnerability in a circle.*

### Values

Values are touchstones that enable the group to participate with dignity, respect and equality. Write down on an index card one value that enables you to offer your best selves in a conversation (e.g., empathy, trust, dignity etc.) With the talking piece, name your value and its significance to you before placing it on the edge of the centerpiece.

### Guidelines

Guidelines are how we manifest these values into a set of reminders to guide our behavior with one another in the circle. Facilitators asked participants to then write down on an index card one guideline that "invites participants to offer their best selves in this conversation (e.g., hold what is shared in confidence, respect the use of the talking piece, etc.) Using the talking piece, name your guideline and its importance to you as the facilitator writes them on a flip chart for all to see."

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After this round, facilitators asked participants to “raise their hand if you are willing to support these guidelines in this circle.” In our case, there was consensus to the guidelines in both circles with no discussion.

## **Round One:**

**Circle 1:** What is a brief story about poverty that either you have experienced or someone you know has, in the present or the past?

**Circle 2:** As you watched the video, what was a story of your own that floated to the top of your mind?

## **Round Two:**

**Circle 1:** What is one thing that disturbs or concerns you the most about the impact of poverty in your community?

**Circle 2:** What is a narrative about poverty that particularly resonates with, or challenges, your understanding of poverty?

## **Round Three:**

**Circle 1:** As a person of faith or as a member of a faith community, how do you feel called to respond to the reality of poverty in your community?

**Circle 2:** How does the video call to you as members of a faith community?

## **Check Out:**

Indicate in one or two words, or a phrase, how you are feeling as we end this circle?

## **Closing Ceremony:**

Opening verse of [Four-Fold Franciscan Blessing](#)

*May God bless us with discomfort  
at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships  
so that we may live deep within our hearts.*

Afterwards, we joined the two groups back together and informally asked for their first impressions. We also invited them to send us additional feedback via email.

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## **Follow Up and Reflective Evaluation**

Overall, both circles went very well. Participant feedback at the conclusion was very positive but we did not have time to gauge their interest in using this process in the future for other types of issues in the life of the faith community. However, several participants asked if we would offer the circle process in the future. For one participant, the circle experience itself was the immediate payoff, even more than the responses to the prompts. Based on the participant feedback, the restorative practice ministry team will plan additional opportunities for circle conversations around other challenging topics.

## **About the Circle Facilitator**

Bill Casey and Michele Chang are members of Our Lady Queen of Peace Catholic Parish (OLQP) in Arlington, VA. They are leaders of the parish's Restorative Practice Ministry.