

# For Ministers of Caring

## Group & Purpose

The purpose of this group is to co-create a new ministry whose members will visit hospitalized parishioners. This ministry has not previously existed in this parish, and so has to be built from the ground up. There is a separate planning group for the structure of the program. The purpose of this particular group, those who do the visits, is what could be referred to as a collaborative learning group, with a focus on formation, growing in the skills and spirituality that will enable us to be effective in this ministry of caring. This is an emergent learning process.

This group was recruited in the late spring of 2023 and had an initial 2 hour evening meeting in June 2023 with a subsequent 2 hour meeting in October. Since then we have met every 4 to 6 weeks for 1 hour on Sunday mornings. All are in person. Typically at these meetings there are as many as 11 and as few as 7 people in attendance. We are all members of the same parish, but most of us did not know each other prior to meeting as a group. Most, but not all, are retired with working backgrounds largely in education or healthcare. Most are married with children, but not all. The parish is comprised of many people who immigrated from Italy.

The purpose for this circle process was to describe visits that we found either satisfying, good, or meaningful and to identify the common attributes underlying those visits. We would then use those insights in planning future learning opportunities.

## Approach and Logistics

This particular circle process took place following an 11am Mass. We had 60 minutes with 6 people in attendance. In preparation, I spoke with the other three members of the planning group about using circle process as the norm for these meetings and they were agreeable, though they were still learning themselves.

The circle process was specifically introduced and used in our first group meeting in June 2023. When I introduced it during the June session, I said “We would be using a version of the same process that was being used for the synod meetings, that it was a way of ensuring that all voices had equal opportunity to speak and contribute, and that this process tended to level our differences in participation based on age, gender, influence, power, temperament.”

No one seemed to be very aware of the synodal process, or restorative justice. The pastor is aware of both but has never used them or spoken about them specifically.

*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).*

## Circle Outline

### Opening Ceremony

Read prayer together using Isaiah 30:10-21 with a particular focus of the last two lines:  
“While from behind a voice whispers in your ear: “This is the way. Walk in it ” when you would go to the right or the left.

### Check-In

How are you feeling in this moment as we begin our work together?

### Values

All of the steps of the circle process were included in the first meeting last June, including articulating core values. For this meeting they referred back to those previously generated.

### Guidelines

Likewise, the group referred to and affirmed guidelines created at prior meetings. These were:

- Listen and observe without judgment
- Allow time and space for all voices to be heard
- Avoid interrupting one who is speaking
- Listen with curiosity and generosity
- Speak for yourself
- Pay attention to feelings as well as words
- Exercise humility in listening, courage in speaking
- Maintain confidentiality
- Minimize external interruptions

### Round One:

First we read The Woodcarver poem and then shared in a round about what stood out for each of us and how the poem might apply to our visits.

### Round Two:

For you, what makes a hospital visit satisfying, meaningful, or good?

### Round Three:

What are we hearing in our stories about our experiences with good, meaningful, satisfying visits?

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## Check Out:

How are you feeling as you leave this circle?

## Closing Ceremony:

John 3: 8 “The wind blows where it will and you can hear the sound it makes, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

## Follow up and Reflective Evaluations

Participants were asked to fill out a written evaluation about their experience. I do evaluations after most meetings. I ask attendees to rate the following on a scale of 1-5

- Good use of my time
- Using a poem to reflect
- Usefulness of central questions
- Feeling heard and respected
- Use of the talking piece and circle process.

For the numerical ratings, most scores were 4 out of 5 and above.

In qualitative feedback, one person valued the time so much she “rearranged her entire day to be here”. In response to the central questions posed, those present identified making a connection, and being a witness were core experiences in meaningful visits. These insights directly informed the topic of the next extended meeting, which will be “Co-Creating Connection.”

For shorter meetings, check in and conversation components are always done in a circle format, but not all steps of the circle process are done every meeting. I continue to discern ways to use elements of this approach in the day to day work of the parish within the constraints of time allotted.

Almost everyone who has volunteered for this ministry has experienced significant losses in their lives, some in the distant past, some more recent. They stepped up for this ministry because they wanted to support others as they had been supported or wanted to offer something they themselves did not receive. Almost everyone hoped to be helpful, and, at the same time, worried they would not be good enough. I think that coming together in this format reinforces connection, honesty and the sharing, accepting and learning from each other's experiences. All of us have come to understand that we are not alone in our fears, hopes, and struggles. Based on the feedback, these meetings have been experienced as uplifting. Additional follow up one-on-one meetings (as part of end of year program and minister self assessment), there are 2 people who need additional support.

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## **About the Circle Facilitator:**

Kathleen McGrail is a parishioner at St. Theodore's Catholic Church in Rochester, NY. She leads a visitation ministry for parishioners who are hospitalized, for whom this circle was created.