

For Reintegration (Preparation)

Group & Purpose

Kolbe House, the jail ministry of the Archdiocese of Chicago, is a local partner of Underground Ministries' "[One Parish One Prisoner](#)" (OPOP) movement. OPOP gathers a team of 7-10 members of a faith congregation and one individual preparing for release from prison. They build relationships over time (with one another and their incarcerated team member) leading up to and continuing through the individual's release. Kolbe House pairs individuals who are currently incarcerated (and approaching release) with local parish-based groups.

Prior to the incarcerated team member's release, the parish-based group gathers monthly for approximately one year and members explore profound and personal topics with each other, such as addiction, mental health, trauma, and interpersonal harm through a series of preparatory modules. Group members range in age, professional background, and familiarity with restorative practices.

At St. Elizabeth of the Trinity Catholic Parish, Team Michael, was preparing to accompany Michael as he transitioned from life in an Illinois Department of Corrections Facility to freedom after three years of incarceration. The presenting needs were not only material support of housing, healthcare, steady income, but also emotional and spiritual support.

These circle processes were crafted and facilitated collaboratively by Emily (who works for Kolbe House) and Dave (who is a leader and member of the St. Elizabeth OPOP group). For team members who were not yet familiar with circle process, Dave and Emily I sent a few links and resources to give them an idea of the process ahead of time.

This circle process, For Reintegration (Preparation), was designed for use with the parish team just before their teammate's release. It is a time that is otherwise heavily focused on logistics like housing and there may be anxiety regarding their teammate's release.

Approach & Logistics

Kolbe House staff shared introductory information about circles and synodality to help them understand the "why" of this type of gathering, and that the invitation to be in relationship with one another differently is not limited to jail ministry but is a call of the universal Church.

The process was designed to take 90 minutes for a group of 7-10 people gathering in-person or virtually. Circle facilitators were prepared to use a timekeeping system for parts of the circle if

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sharing becomes unbalanced or time is a concern.

The circle facilitator invited the parish group to include in the centerpiece something to symbolize the teammate who is currently incarcerated.

Circle Outline

Opening Ceremony

For the opening prayer, we used the [Welcoming Prayer](#). This prayer follows in the tradition of contemplative or centering prayer and is commonly used by One Parish One Prisoner inside and outside of prison.

For this virtual circle participants were asked to retrieve an object of significance nearby that could symbolize their talking piece, then to verbally pass to the next person when they finished speaking. The order of speaking was written in the chat.

Check-In

How are you arriving to this circle today?

Values

This group has been meeting over time now for several months. You have engaged in conversations with one another --- some of which were surely very life-giving, while others might have caused anxiety or conflict. What is one value that has been important ---or that needs to be practiced more fully --- for you to feel comfortable in this group, to feel that you can participate as your true self?

Guidelines

Begin by offering the standard guidelines from the Conversations in Communion Facilitator Guide, then ask: Do you have any questions about these guidelines or wish to add anything additional? If there are questions or additions, address those directly. Follow up by asking: Do you agree to honor these guidelines? Ask participants to say "Yes" or "I agree" as the talking piece is passed.

Round One:

We all make decisions in our lives --- some big, some small; some on our own, some with someone else; some that are popular, and some that are not. Bring to mind a time when you made a difficult decision, or perhaps even what you now consider a wrong decision. ... How did

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you come to that decision? How did your loved ones respond? Was there anyone who didn't agree with your decision? How did things turn out?

Round Two:

During this OPOP journey, we have been learning to imitate the unconditional love that God shows us, by showing that love to each other and to our teammate. How has God been inviting you to practice this unconditional love during the journey that has passed, or in this moment, or that you feel coming during these next weeks and months?

Round Three:

What do you need from this group or from other areas of your life in order for you to feel supported through these coming months?

Check Out:

Check-Out Round: In one word, describe how you are leaving this meeting.

Closing Ceremony:

Imagine our teammate in the middle of the circle. Hold out our hands in blessing. Spontaneously share words of blessing for them. End with "Amen" when it seems there is no more sharing.

Follow Up and Reflective Evaluation

I was tempted to short-cut values and guidelines because the group already knew each other very well, but I resisted the temptation. It turned out to be a beautiful moment for them to be explicit about the values that they have built up and grown to appreciate in each other, and then be explicit about their intent to continue to honor them.

During round 2 of sharing, I was moved to write down short phrases from their reflections on how they were being invited to love. When the round ended, I ask them to imagine God saying these words to their teammate, and then read them out loud – phrases like, "You are beloved. I will keep showing up for you. You are worthy of another chance." It was a powerful moment to reflect back the depth of their reflection.

Overall, this circle was perfect for the first group who experienced it. It gave them an opportunity to become grounded in the mission of what they are being called to do and let go of things out of their control.

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For Reintegration (Support)

Group and Purpose

This circle process was held upon Mike's release from prison. The purpose of this circle was to build connection and trust amongst the whole team and set the tone for how we wanted to work together.

Approach and Logistics

In preparation, I (David) was researching circle keeping and prisons in Illinois and discovered that a prison in Kewanee, IL had been doing some [circles](#). They were conducted by a former inmate with the assistance of Sr. Janet from Precious Blood Ministry of Reconciliation. The circles were very well received by the inmates and the administration and they are a constant subject of the prison [newsletter](#).

As it turned out, Michael followed the Kewanee prison newsletter on his tablet. So, when I mentioned the idea of a circle process for our team gatherings, Michael was animated about the opportunity. He said that he did see how well circle keeping was being received, and was open to the idea of being part of one upon release.

We committed to 1.5 hour, in-person circles on a monthly basis at a minimum, but would suggest more frequency and longer duration for our first circles when Michael is released.

Circle Outline

Opening Ceremony

As part of the One Parish One Prisoner Ministry we will open with the [Welcoming Prayer](#).

Check-In

How are you arriving to the circle today?

Values

This group has been meeting or writing letters over time now for more than a year. What is one value that has been important for you to feel comfortable in this group, to feel that you can participate as your true self?

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Guidelines

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Round One:

This group clearly feels a strong connection with one another, but with each of us here today we also bring with us other people in our lives. Think about a person with whom you have felt a sense of connection, and share about that person with us.

Round Two:

What is something you appreciate about the connection that exists among this group?

Round Three:

What are you looking forward to over the coming days and weeks?

Check Out:

In one word, how are you leaving the circle today?

Closing Ceremony:

A Prayer from Thomas Merton

My Lord God
I have no idea where I am going.
I cannot see the road ahead of me
and I do not know for certain where it will end.
Nor do I know myself,
and the fact that I think I am following your will
does not mean that I am actually doing so.
But I believe
that the desire to please you
does in fact please you.
And I hope
that I have that desire in all that I am doing.
I hope I will never do anything apart from that desire.
And I know that if I do this

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you will lead me by the right road,
though I may know nothing about it.
Therefore I will trust you always.
Though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death,
I will not fear,
for you are ever with me,
and will never leave me
to face my perils alone.

Follow Up and Reflective Evaluation

We aimed to practice patience with ourselves and everyone, which would be key as we tried a new way of coming together. We acknowledged that it was different from our previous ways of meeting, but the more true we stay to the process the more fruitful would be the relationship building, trust, and bonds formed.

Like the “Circle for Reintegration (Preparation)”, the conversation about values was a powerful moment for group members to affirm the values that they see in this group. It seemed that group members appreciated the opportunity to share about another person in their lives, as some very deep sharing took place, especially about loss.

A note from Emily: In several moments, participants spoke to their recently-released teammate directly. Perhaps inspired by that pattern, I did, as well, but as an “outsider” to the group (this was my first time meeting him), it sparked a back-and-forth that didn’t need to happen during a circle. In retrospect, I would 1) make a point to reach out to the recently-released teammate before the circle, and 2) resist temptations to speak too much during the circle.

For Reintegration (Accompaniment)

Group & Purpose

The following circle was held with the same group during one of their subsequent monthly meetings. The intention was to reflect together on how each person was being impacted by the OPOP experience so far.

Approach & Logistics

The group met on a weekday evening for an hour and a half. The facilitators prepared a sheet that was on each person's chair containing the opening and closing prayer and circle guidelines. Before beginning the circle process, they shared in dinner together.

When Michael arrived, he was not in a good place. He informed the group of difficult news he had received about a family member and a frustrating experience attempting to acquire a lifesaving prescription. The group tried to comfort him and reassure him, but he was not responding. While we were still eating, Mike was anxious and went and sat down in the circle. We all then gathered in circle.

Circle Outline

Opening Ceremony

[Welcoming Prayer](#)

Check-In

How are you arriving to this circle today?

Values

Reviewed values created in previous circles

Guidelines

- Respect the talking piece: everyone listens, everyone has a turn
- Speak from the heart: your truth, your perspectives, your experiences
- Listen from the heart
- Trust that you will know what to say: no need to rehearse

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- Say just enough: without feeling rushed, be concise and considerate of the time of others.

Round One:

What is going well, and what has been difficult since we last met?

Round Two:

We can all agree that the experience of being part of OPOP has changed us. What have we learned? In particular, what have we learned about God's heart, about ourselves, about each other, about the stones (structural obstacles to reintegration) about our layers (personal defenses)?

Round Three:

(Reflecting on the most recent learning module on prison abolition) Considering the learning module asks us to reconsider our cultural norms and world view in regard to criminal justice and prisons, and rightfully asserts that prisons don't work, what do you imagine the role of our church should look like? Remember that Jesus, Paul and Peter were all incarcerated and executed by the state.

Check Out:

In one word, describe how you are leaving this meeting?

Closing Ceremony:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love.

Where there is injury, pardon;

Where there is discord, union;

Where there is doubt, faith;

Where there is error, truth;

Where there is despair, hope;

Where there is darkness, light;

Where there is sadness, joy.

O, Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console:

To be understood, as to understand;

To be loved, as to love:

For it is in giving that we receive,

It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,

And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

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Follow Up and Reflective Evaluation

In first two rounds, Michael did not share, though all other members thoughtfully responded.

After Round 2, Michael excused himself, and left the room. We all decided to take a break. When Michael came back we all reemphasized our support for him, and that whatever he was going through we wanted to go through it with him. One of our team members had shared a funny story and it brought a smile to Michael. He broke from his reluctance to share, and began answering the questions that were put forth when we were in circle. We learned that in spite of the recent streak of bad news that Mike was dealing with, he also had some very hopeful news. We decided that our next meeting would be to go to dinner at a local restaurant that Michael chose. (We did not end up doing the planned round three question.) We closed with our planned closing prayer.

Note from Dave: In many ways the suspension of the circle was needed and elicited a communication from Michael that was consistent with the kind of sharing we would have expected if we were in circle. I know I can't recreate the moment, but our ability to be responsive to Michael, and therefore the needs of the group, by suspending the formal circle process created an amorphous type of circle that brought us closer. In a very surprising way I think the circle process has moved our team from a loosely affiliated group to a tight unit, almost like a family.

About the Circle Facilitators

Dave McNaughton is a parishioner at St. Elizabeth of the Trinity in Chicago, IL. He is a member of One Parish One Prisoner/ Team Michael. Emily Cortina is Coordinator of Outreach and Formation at Kolbe House Jail Ministry of the Archdiocese of Chicago. She coordinates the "One Parish One Prisoner" ministry in collaboration with Underground Ministries based in Washington State.

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