



THE INSTITUTE *for* RESTORATIVE JUSTICE
and RESTORATIVE DIALOGUE

REPORT ON THE
COMMUNITY CIRCLE PILOT PROGRAM

Prepared for the
Austin/Travis County Hate Crimes Task Force
Restoration Work Group

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COMMUNITY CIRCLE EVALUATION

Community Circle Background and Process

A Community Circle was held at the Austin Area Interreligious Ministries Office on January 14th, 2012. There were 11 participants reflecting a range of hate incidents as well as representatives from the Austin Independent School District (AISD), the Austin Police Department (APD), and the Austin District Attorney's office. The Community Circle lasted a little over 2 hours.

Preparation for the Community Circle

Preparation for the Circle was done by phone with 8 of the 11 participants. Preparation consisted of describing the work of the Austin/Travis County Hate Crimes Task Force (hereafter Task Force), the purpose of the restoration work group, and the purpose of the Circle including the sharing of information with the Austin/Travis County Hate Crimes Task Force. Information was given about how the Circle would be run including the use of a talking piece, a format of inviting each individual in rotation to provide answers to questions asked by the facilitator, no back and forth conversation, and making sure participants understood that they would participate in the Circle as individuals outside of their public role, e.g. police officer, and would speak as little or as much as they'd like within the time constraints. Participants were asked to think ahead about their story so it could be told briefly (2-3 minutes) and their energy in the Circle could be spent detailing the impact of the incident on their lives. Participants were also asked to bring an object that reminded them of the hate incident or of what they lean on to give them strength and resilience. Participants would not be asked to talk about the object but rather it would be placed in the center of the Circle as a way to root them while they were in the Circle. Participants were also informed that the Circle would be taped and transcribed in order to retrieve important information for sharing with the Task Force and for guiding the restoration work group in doing future circles. There would be no identifying information and participants were free to ask that the tape be turned off at any point he or she was talking. Three participants were not prepared for the Circle because the facilitator had no way to contact them or did not know they would be participating until the day of the Circle. The three participants who were not prepared by telephone were given a quick overview of these points when they arrived for the Circle on January 14th.

Introduction and Facilitation of the Circle

The Community Circle was held at a central facility in Austin. There were signs outside directly participants to the meeting. Coffee and bagels were available prior to the Circle and these refreshments gave participants a chance to mingle and meet each other on an informal and relaxed basis prior to participating in the Circle. Participants had name tags to help with identifying each other. The Circle room was bright and had few distractions. Chairs were put in a circle and all participants were given name tents (first names only) that they placed in front of their feet so others in the Circle could immediately recognize who was speaking. Participants were also given a written explanation of the taping that included the comments that had been made about it during their preparation. The facilitator explained the purpose of the circle, the purpose of the talking piece, and previewed what would be happening during the two hours. There were three observers who sat behind the circle in an alcove. They took notes throughout the

Circle. They were introduced to the Circle participants as core members of the Task Force.

The facilitator asked a series of questions (see Appendix A) beginning with inviting participants to share values or conditions that needed to be present so that participants could feel emotionally safe during the experience. The values and conditions were written on a large white board so everyone could see them throughout the Circle. The values included honesty, attention, privacy, presence, feelings- being okay with feelings, sympathy/compassion, equality, empathy, patience, come from heart, and respect.

At the end of the Circle the facilitator asked participants to take a few minutes of silence for reflection on 1-2 words that they could take back into their lives and the meaning of having been a part of this circle. The words shared were as follows: Hope, connection, freedom/more free, thankful, obligated, absorbing energy, feel like I've learned an incredible amount, emotional/impactful, compassion, anger, empowered., honored, conviction, to build community, humility, humbled, broken/contrite/hopeful, similarity, hope, fortunate, refreshing, keep this in the front of our minds, dialogue, will talk about this with friends, appreciation for diversity, will talk about this in sermon., grateful, blessed, leaving with a softer heart.

Circle Follow-up

The facilitator called all participants within 10 days to two weeks after the Circle to get feedback on their experience. The verbal feedback was typed and summarized for this report. The questions asked are in Appendix B. This evaluation covers the benefits of the Circle for participants including whether they found the experience worthwhile, management of the circle process including preparation and facilitation, and concerns and suggestions for future Community Circles.

Benefits to Participants

All participants felt that the Community Circle was highly worthwhile. The benefits mentioned focused on feelings shared, not feeling alone, the quality and level of sharing, increased awareness, and the recognition that others care.

Expression of Feelings

Participants were struck by their own self-expression and the intensity of the feelings they felt and expressed about what had happened to them or others. One participant spoke about another Circle member who had shared briefly with him before the Circle meeting some of the events she had experienced. "When I asked her later what gave her the strength to speak out [in the circle], it was because of what someone else in the Circle had shared...this gave her the courage to be as vocal." In one instance, a participant was shocked by hearing himself. "I worried I was cruel in my remarks to others. I thought I was rude to her. I was expressing emotion but felt I shouldn't say that. I let my emotions get the better of me. My hostility emerged." Another participant commented that he had never experienced anything like the Circle before. Commenting on his job he said, "We often don't have a chance to deal with feelings. It was interesting to hear from that perspective, basic emotions, very informative. Here are feelings and emotions a part from what happens to the defendant or the trial process." For some, listening to participants' stories, which included strong feelings was hard but worthwhile. "The stories were so sad and sometimes listening to something that is sad creates sadness in me. I felt terrible for some of the other sand carried it with me for a while and still do.

Hearing from a woman what's like to be born a boy and wanting to wear women's dresses. I put myself in that situation with an incredible need to be a male. This was horribly painful and I felt it." For some participants it was difficult to hear the feelings and not respond. One member commented that hearing others' stories reawakened some of her own experiences. "It was hard to sit there and listen and not just walk out of the room." Another member wanted to go fix everything. "It was difficult to hear the stories in and of themselves. I wanted to go out and get the guy."

Reduced Isolation and Sense of Community

A core benefit of participating in the Circle was the sense of not being alone. Some participants talked about being in the circle giving a sense of credibility to their experiences, a sense of strength and power. "It was helpful to me because it created that sense of solidarity—people of different colors, different backgrounds coming together and speaking...It provided consolation..there are others out there as well and they are as important as we are." Participants also realized that anyone can have their experiences. "I enjoyed ___ who came to the epiphany that she wasn't one only one out there, the only one scared to walk alone at night." Another Circle member said, "When there is a collective group it makes me feel anyone can have this experience. You don't know if it's a big deal or not. You don't want to be a cry baby."

Depth of Sharing

Some participants were surprised and a little awed at how quickly a group of strangers could feel safe enough to share exceedingly personal information. "It was inspirational because people who were so different came together and when they came together they had no problem talking about their inner most issues or things they had never talked about before." One of these people shared her own surprise. "The experience lends to feeling safe and not judged because the other person has gone through it too. Things I spoke about are things I put away, don't think about them everyday." Another member observed, "At one point one of the victims was toying in her head, 'Am I going to talk about this or not?' In that short period of time she decided with total strangers she would talk...about it. In that short a time people could share at the level they did."

Increased Awareness of Impact

Participants realized that the Circle process increased their awareness of hate incidents and the ripple effects. "I just kept thinking of children being affected. What am I doing to protect the innocent?" Some members were struck by the long lasting consequences of an incident for others. "It helped to understand the consequences of the crime. People carried things for a long, long time. This was new information." In one instance, a Circle member commented on learning new things from his partner who had gone through the hate incident with him. "It was nice to have him there [in the circle]. He was being very supportive. I could hear his perspective. We haven't talked about it much. My partner is not the kind who will pour his heart out. We felt closer afterwards." A Circle member described learning important new information directly applicable to her life. "I realized this person was attacked in an area where I hang out. So if he can get hurt what does it mean for me?" For others just being in the group with someone whose difference they had not experienced before heightened their awareness of their impact on others. Speaking about the Circle, a participant said, "It was professional and individualized as well, sitting next to a transgender. Because I'm familiar with the people

who cause these things, I have more of a reason to stand up with people who caused this... it made me more aware of how I hurt others.”

Feeling Others Care

Finally, a major benefit was the participants recognized that others cared. Some commented on the importance that the Circle was done in conjunction with the work of the Task Force. “It helps knowing there is a hate crimes task force and the Circle was so that the findings can be forwarded to the Task Force.” Another referenced a statement in the email sent to all participants. “The email stated, ‘Findings will be put forth’ and that bolsters a sense of optimism that something can and will be done about it.” Others spoke about the nature of the interaction in the Circle. “The people who came were there. They were feeling safe and they made others feel safe. Everyone really WANTED to be there.” Some commented on the facilitation. “My impression was that the facilitator was concerned about each person’s concerns. I felt accepted...I could tell from your expression how concerned you were.” Some noted that the stereotypes of some participants were challenged. “This Circle member was serious about law enforcement but she realized that these are people. They aren’t against me. They are here to help.” The sense of caring is perhaps best summarized in this participant’s statement. “When I left I felt citizenship. Everyone is a 3rd class citizen. I felt a stronger sense of belonging, camaraderie.”

Management of the Circle Process

Participants were asked about their sense of safety during the Circle, advance preparation, facilitation and the issue of group membership.

Safety

For the most part, participants felt safe in the Circle. A host of factors contributed to that sense of safety demonstrating that this issue is highly individualized. Items included that the police officers present were not in uniform, a trust-based relationship with Tom Spencer who had encouraged several members’ participation, the level of professionalism that accompanied facilitation of the Circle, the informal meet and greet before the formal Circle occurred, the comfort of the physical facility, the ground rules made before the Circle sharing began, the experience of being able to say “whatever I felt with people who were not like me in any way,” etc.

There were several participants who discussed issues that interrupted their ability to feel a complete sense of emotional safety. One Circle member had difficulty with the presence of the police. This person indicated that it would have helped if participants had known ahead the various groups that would be represented in the Circle e.g. school counselors, ministers, police officers, folks from the District Attorney’s office, etc. This person also felt it was important for the facilitator to be clear about the standing of these people by noticing the difference between Circle participants relative to the fact that although members are equal, in their social roles which are also represented in the Circle, some have more power and authority in the community.

A circle member who mistrusts the police also had difficulty with the taping and the fact that a police officer would be in charge of what happened to the tape.

Because the police officers were present both as observers and group members, and because some participants could have negative history with APD or other departments, this participant was concerned that it impacted members’ ability to talk openly. The participant noted that another Circle member was commenting on her

experience with the police and “was apologizing at one point. She should not have to apologize in these settings. If the differences were more explicit, the conversation would have been broader.”

A different participant had safety concerns about one Circle member. “I’m not sure why s/he was there. I’m not sure s/he was a victim of crime. I didn’t trust him/her.” This person questioned the authenticity of the circle member. Although the participant felt safe, there was concern about others in the room and if this member made them uncomfortable.

Finally, a participant raised many questions about the management of the tape and the data on the tape. Although this person was not concerned about the taping itself, the worry expressed was about the lack of clarity about how the information would be used. This issue remains important and the request was made for feedback about both the destruction of the tape and the use of the information. Part of this person’s concern is that by being part of the Circle it could be assumed that this person supports the idea of hate crime legislation. “I don’t support them (the laws). It might be assumed we are advocating for it because we were part of the Circle.” The person also indicated that s/he would be all right with the facilitator being in charge of destroying the tape.

It is important to note that although there were some issues that interrupted the sense of safety for several participants, these concerns, though certainly relevant and important to address, did not get significantly in the way of their sharing quite fully in the Circle.

Preparation

For those who received advance preparation, participants found it useful. “It provided comfort about what to expect and questions to think about.” Several participants commented on the professionalism it engendered including that it added to the credibility of the process. “Preparation was perfect. You contacted me, sent me directions, greeted me, sent emails. It was easy to deal with. There were signs there. It was definitely the most professional thing done in a long time.” Those who were not prepared felt it was not critical to their experience—“I didn’t require that much preparation”—because they themselves were not victims of a hate incident. Others missed having it and would have liked time to think about what to expect and to have brought something for the center of the circle. “I didn’t know I was supposed to bring something. Another Circle member tried to get in touch with me (to prepare me) but my house had been hit by lightning.” One person felt that the telephone preparation left them with too much to remember. “I felt like I was grabbing things to remember.” She suggested following the phone call with an email outlining what had been said in the conversation so people could have it in writing.

Facilitation

Participants were satisfied with the facilitation of the Circle noting that it was highly professional. This quality helped them to feel comfortable and trust an unfamiliar process with others they did not know. “I thought you did a good job. When I found out you were a professional doing restorative justice work and that you have years of effort behind you, you’re qualified to do this...Nobody was rushed. It was respectful.” A number of participants mentioned the importance of the rules made at the beginning. “What was helpful was that you laid down the rules—not too much from the facilitator but you could have jumped in if necessary.” Participants also noted the importance of the

talking piece and the meaning it came to hold for each person. “It helped holding the piece but no expectations for questions, or there didn’t seem to be. I didn’t feel on edge.” Another member commented that “I liked the talking piece..The meaning of the talking piece—this is the person talking, not interrupting or feeling we had to come to some sort of rescue. It helped to censure me both as a listener or a speaker.” Others spoke about the importance of little things like the name tags, Kleenex and the questions. “Your questions were perfect. Every question built on each other. Each question let us get deeper and deeper into the issues. Questions were in order, which seemed to facilitate everything.”

Some participants made suggestions for the facilitation of future Circles. “Pass the talking piece to the left sometimes. In the Circle you passed it to the right and those Circle members were more the observers.” One person felt it might help to mix up the “story tellers and observers. Vary it.” Another person was concerned that having the talking piece may actually have inhibited a particular member.

Membership

With some exceptions, participants felt good about the Circle membership. They frequently commented on the diversity in the group and the unlikely combinations of people who had experienced hate incidents. “Membership was executed very well. Several different groups were represented. It was nice to have Muslim representation.” A number of members commented on the need for African American representation. “In the future I’d want African American participants. We tried but this needs to be a big focus in time. Need for more reach out here...The African American voice is needed.” Some participants had concerns about their own participation. “I don’t know how they felt about my being there. Would it have been better to have just victims? Not sure my presence benefitted them. I do think that for some It might have helped my being there.” Another member shared her worry about being a legitimate participant. “It was a very diverse crowd. I hadn’t experienced a hate crime. I had apprehension. I was worried I was being inappropriate with speaking my mind. I was worried about my impact. There were people there with genuine issues, destroyed by hatred. I’ve seen the side effects.”

Concerns and Suggestions

Inhibitors to Participation

Participants’ concerns focused on the issue of the taping, the presence of Circle members in authority positions without advance notification to other Circle members, issues of safety and the potential inhibiting effect of having Circle participants from groups where there is negative history, groups are mistrusted, or particular members present as disingenuous or arouse concern about the safety of other Circle members. These issues have already been described including suggestions to make issues about representation of particular groups known to Circle members before they participate as well as the need to note differences between group members relative to positions of authority. This concern was mentioned indirectly by another participant who shared more with me on the telephone about what he did not share in the Circle. Specially, he commented on his anger with the District Attorney’s office because what had happened to him was not prosecuted as a hate crime and the offender only got probation. Subsequently the offender assaulted someone else in another city and only then was the crime considered a hate crime and the probation revoked. It is possible that having representation from the District Attorney’s office inhibited sharing this information.

Ways to Increase Comfort and Participation

Concerns were also described earlier about the direction of passing the talking piece or the mixing of participants so that no one person always starts the response to the facilitator's questions and/or participants who are story tellers or representatives of institutions are better distributed throughout the circle. One participant raised concerns about the seating of the observers. She recognized the need for their presence but felt that having them sit behind the facilitator interrupted her concentration. She noted that even though the focus of the group is not on the facilitator, that person is looked at more frequently because they are responsible for the Circle. Consequently her suggestion is to place the observers behind participants who are directly across from the facilitator in order to minimize awareness of their presence.

Ways to Increase Communication

There is need for using emails to provide information about the Circle process after the preparation phone call and also before doing the debriefing phone call so participants have the opportunity to think about the questions prior to answering them. Participants also commented on the need for the facilitator to say something at the end of the Circle to participants about the future. Specifically, participants need reminders to continue to be mindful of the respect that occurred in the Circle for when they meet each other and what they say to each other whether the encounter happens in a grocery store, a pub, or even just in the parking lot.

Although most participants liked having food and a social time to mix before the Circle began, one participant found this protocol to be anxiety provoking. "It was lovely to have food but it was also nerve racking. The time to socialize before the group was too long. I felt very nervous and it created a lot of anxiety. Just in coming I was anxious believing I was the only person there who hasn't directly experienced hate. I worried they will hate me. They will think I'm a stupid martyr. I'd be the outsider. So I arrived feeling unsafe. Having to wait makes that worse. The anticipation of what's coming isn't always positive." This person suggested shortening the socializing time in the future.

One person felt that more time was needed for the Circle. She recognized there was not time to tell ones' full story of a hate incident but that a little more time would have helped. In conjunction with this suggestion, another member discussed the need for more closure of the Circle. "After putting your soul out there you feel a little interrupted. You need a way to close the moment. I had to process alone. It would have helped to tell people what to expect [to feel later]. Perhaps another round so people could give ending thoughts. We didn't really have the chance to address each other."

Future Directions

Ripple Impact of the Circle

All participants are interested in some sort of future involvement. Most are open to being part of another Circle or talking to potential participants for future Circles. Several are interested in getting more involved in one of the Task Force's work groups. One participant has already spoken with the doorman at Oil Can Harry's (OCH) who is interested in being part of the next Community Circle and has much to share about what he has observed. One participant wants to introduce his congregation to more of the ideas expressed at the Circle and is interested in having a GLBTQ panel to meet with an interested group of his parishioners for dialogue.

Ongoing Need to Belong

The expressed interest in being part of something more, belonging to something larger is very important to the participants. One member said, “I would like to be involved. I don’t have the opportunity to tell people who I am. Nothing special about me but there is a need to humanize me so I can stop being seen as strange. I’m more than happy to help. I’m willing to volunteer. I want to speak. I’m fine talking to future participants.” Another person said, “This is a restructuring phase of my life. I’m open to doing all of it in the future. If not, I’m going to be a drug addict. I need a way to be a part of this and a more direct way to be involved. I need to do more than busy work. I now hear the chords in a different way. I want to be involved with the strong ones. I want to give others strength.” A participant put the importance of the circle and its’ impact quite succinctly. “In leaving I felt humbled and smarter than all my friends. Truly humbled. Put yourself in someone’s shoes before you yell at someone on the freeway knowing they have had a lousy experience.”

Summary

The piloting of the Community Circle was well received by the Circle participants. They felt it was worthwhile. They felt generally safe in the Circle. Most of the suggestions are simple to implement. Several areas need additional attention.

Outreach to potential participants likely needs to be done informally rather than using lists of victims obtained from APD or the District Attorney’s office. Although there are numerous victims of hate crimes and hate incidents, many if not most do not come forth. They need encouragement from those they trust to be part of efforts like the Community Circle. Their initial willingness to participate is probably based as well on the trust they have already with whomever is asking them to be part of a circle process. Clearly this type of outreach is critical for participation from African Americans who long have mistrusted social institutions because of historic prejudice and negative interactions and do not report bias motivated experiences. This type of outreach is also healthy for community building because it asks everyone invested in Community Circles as a healing mechanism to be a part of this outreach process for future Community Circles.

Several participants indicated concerns about members’ discomfort with having some of the participants also be representatives of public institutions. Although suggestions about noting differences in roles and authority status are helpful and should be implemented, it is also important to recognize that having such diversity, possible tension, and the opportunity for movement is a part of the dialogue process that restorative justice circles engender. It is common for others in a circle to set off each others’ memories, fears, stereotypes, and left over business. The goal of a Community Circle is that participants can encounter each other safely and that participants can feel safe enough to express whatever thoughts or feelings they feel moved to share about the impact of what has happened to them. Doing that with people who are “like” those who caused or contributed to the harm commonly engenders healing rather than additional trauma. It is important, therefore, to use sensitivity as well as intentionality specific to the goals and objectives of the Circle process in considering Circle membership.

Appendix A
Community Circle Questions

1. Opening: Why we are together?
2. Introductions and expectations: Now that each of you has agreed to participate in this circle, what do you hope happens? What would matter to you?
3. Our wish is to create an emotionally safe space where people can step outside of the normal ways they interact with people, to tap into a level of authentic human communication. What values or conditions can we establish to set a tone where you can more openly talk with people who care?
4. You've each had unique experiences of being physically or emotionally attacked just because of your identity—who you are—or known someone who was singled out, bullied, attacked on the basis that something about them or their very 'being' is wrong. I wish we had far more time so you could go into your full story but please speak to the hate words or actions you've experienced or responded to and the effect those words or actions have had on you, your families, and your lives. How are you different (what do you do or not do) as a result of what happened).
5. Let's do another round and add anything you would like to what you have already said.
6. What did you need or what do you still need to feel safe or safer. What do you need from the community, however you define it, that might make some difference to you?
7. Closing: Take a few minutes of silence for reflection on 1-2 words of what you can take back into your lives and the meaning of being part of this circle.

Appendix B
Debriefing Questions from the Community Circle

1. Did you find the Community Circle a worthwhile experience? If so what made it worthwhile? If not, what stood in the way of it being worthwhile?
2. Did you feel safe in the Community Circle? If so, what things contributed to feeling safe? If not, what things make you feel less safe than you'd like to feel?
3. Please comment on your experience of the preparation done or not done with you before the Circle process began.
4. Please comment on your experience of the facilitation of the Community Circle including things like the talking piece, bringing objects for the center of the circle, etc.
5. Please comment on the membership of the Community Circle. What groups including agencies would you have liked to be there that weren't?
6. What were "hard spots" for you either during the Circle or afterwards? Hard spots don't necessarily mean something bad. We'd just like to know what was difficult for you.
7. What suggestions do you have for future Community Circles? What things would you keep? What things would you change or do differently?
8. In what ways, if any, would you like to be involved in the future? (Suggestions: Hate Crimes Task Force workgroup, another Community Circle, available to those who are considering being part of a Community Circle, etc.)