



Interfaith
Restorative Practices Coalition



RESTORATIVE PRACTICES FOR THE CHURCH

(This is the first in a series of articles that relate restorative practices to the sacred scriptures of the congregations that are part of the Interfaith Conference)

Don't mistreat someone who has mistreated you. But try to earn the respect of others, and do your best to live at peace with everyone. (Romans 12:17-18 Contemporary English Version)

At the heart of Christian belief is reconciliation, God's restoration of human life and all creation to God's intent through Christ's life, death, and resurrection. The philosophy and work of restorative practices, although not identified as Christian, can aid individuals and congregations to explore ways to nurture and deepen healthy relationships, engage in difficult conversations, and repair the damage done when harm is experienced.

Restorative practices are frequently reflected in biblical accounts of the reconciliation and transformation that happen through the experience of God's gracious love. Such an experience is seen in Paul's encounter of the Risen Lord on the road to Damascus and his subsequent meeting with Ananias. A restorative practice called a "talking circle" can transform how a congregation perceives itself, makes decisions for future action, and discusses or resolves challenging issues. Because others agree to listen fully, a talking circle allows participants to share their stories, experiences, feelings, and beliefs without interruption or evaluation. Through committing to respectful listening and truthful speech in a talking circle, participants experience and reflect the transformation born of God's peace with us through Christ's death "while we were yet sinners" (Romans 5:8).

In Romans, Paul charges us to "not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds," or put more simply, to let God change the way we think, and also speak and hear (12:1-2). When we are called to outdo one another in showing honor (12:10) there is a means to do so in the structure of the talking circle. Participants agree to trust the circle keeper (facilitator) to create and maintain a safe space for all, to respect a talking piece used to designate whose turn it is to speak, and to abide by shared agreements to listen with respect, speak from the heart, and respect confidentiality.

Talking circles have their origin in the restorative traditions of native and aboriginal peoples, from the Yukon to New Zealand. This process that fosters a sense of respect and equality among participants can richly benefit all kinds of settings, both religious and secular. For Christian congregations talking circles offer a means to relate biblical spirituality and the community's life together in the fruits of God's love.

The foundational values for circles are respect, honesty, humility, sharing, courage, inclusivity, empathy, trust, forgiveness, and love.¹ Through listening deeply and spiritually, circles provide a process Christians can use to claim the following additional values we share as members of the Body of Christ (*God's Spirit baptized each of us and made us part of the body of Christ*, I Corinthians 12:13).

We are all created in God's image and life is sacred. Circles invite participants to enter into relationship with others as companions who share and listen to one another's stories. This is a humanizing approach that embodies the biblical belief that humankind is created in God's image and that life is sacred.

Feelings are honored. When congregations attempt to make decisions together, opinions often diverge and feelings are strong. Sharing in a circle can ward off potentially damaging conflict because participants have agreed to honor others' feelings – and, thus, honor the work of God's indwelling Spirit. The talking piece promotes respectful listening and models how God hears us in love and patience.

Christ is present. Circles encourage participants to tell stories. The Bible has been called "God's story with us" and believers treasure stories because they resonate in our own lives and experiences. Jesus often used stories (parables) to describe God's kingdom and his hearers were awed by how he "taught with authority." Jesus also listened deeply to a vast array of speakers. Stories told and heard in a circle are opportunities to lovingly reverence Christ and engage participants as agents of reconciliation, "ambassadors for Christ" (II Corinthians 5:20), who make God present in the world.

Things are set right. Usually talking circles have work to do: come to a decision, resolve conflict, or heal relationships. Reconciliation and forgiveness can be part of the process, but of greater importance is that an environment is created that allows people to speak their truth in a safe place and move forward in a spirit of peace and goodwill. Justice – in Hebrew to set right – calls for time, patience, ongoing engagement, and a lifelong commitment: *The LORD has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?* (Micah 6:8). So too restoration and reconciliation are processes in which Christians can trust in God's promise that "I am making all things new" (Revelation 21:5). Restorative practices can nurture compassionate loving communities that embody God's love and the fullness of God's ever-emerging kingdom.

© 2016. Co-authored by Carol Hegland and Betsy Gonwa. Carol Hegland is a trained circle keeper and a pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. Betsy Gonwa holds a Masters in Christian Spirituality and a Certificate in Spiritual Direction from Creighton University. Both serve as volunteers in the Community Conferencing Program of the District Attorney's Office of Milwaukee and are members of the Interfaith Restorative Practices Coalition. The Coalition is part of the Interfaith Conference of Greater Milwaukee. Contact: Interfaith Restorative Practices Coalition, rpmilw@gmail.com; Carol Hegland, carolhegland@att.net; Betsy Gonwa, bwgonwa@sbcglobal.net. This is the first in a series. Similar articles will follow relating restorative practices to the sacred scriptures of other faith congregations that are part of the Interfaith Conference. Copies may be made for educational purposes without written permission of the authors, provided that the number of copies made does not exceed 100, and proper credit is given.

¹ Pranis, Kay, Barry Stuart, and Mark Wedge. *Peacemaking Circles: From Crime to Community* [St. Paul: Living Justice Press, 2003].