MINNESOTA
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY

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1999 Community Circles Dialogues

Discussion Guide

Facilitator's Version

Getting Started

TO BEGIN ...

(20 minutes)

1. Welcome and Introductions
△ *Facilitators: Welcome everyone to the group. Share names around the circle.*

2. Why are we here?

Community circles are intended to:

- **Raise awareness** about the challenges of race, housing and education for our neighborhoods, our city and our region, and to help participants learn more about the complexity of these issues.

- **Provide an opportunity to talk** honestly and deeply about these issues and explore some possible solutions.

- **Generate suggestions** for possible action that we can take as individuals, as organizations, and/or collectively as a community, to address the challenges of race, housing, and education.

△ *Facilitators: Briefly discuss the purpose of this community circle. Explain that the dialogues will probably be experienced and have some impact on everyone at a personal or individual level, in connection with their neighborhood or a group they may be involved with, and on a public policy or community-wide level. (All three levels can happen at the same time and each one is important.)*

3. How do we create a productive dialogue?

Take this opportunity to set expectations and meeting guidelines for your group.
△ *Facilitators: You might want to include the following in this discussion:*
- *Discuss roles of facilitator and participants (see Handbook for Facilitators)*
- *Discuss the differences between dialogue and debate (see Handbook for Facilitators)*
- *Review or create discussion guidelines for your circle (see Handbook for sample guidelines, or have the group develop its own). You may want to post these guidelines on a flip chart and revisit them at the beginning of future circle sessions.*

CONNECTING PEOPLE AND THE ISSUES

(60 minutes)

1. Tell us your name and a favorite community and/or neighborhood event in which you participate.
   △ *Facilitators: The initial question strives to establish a basic connection among the dialogue participants.*

2. Share some of your personal "story" with the group by responding to the following questions:
   △ *Facilitators: Ask participants to take turns telling their stories. You should go first to model sharing a story that is brief yet somewhat revealing to give the conversation some depth. You may want to post the questions on a flip chart.*

   - Where did you grow up? (big city, inner city neighborhood, suburb, rural, small town, farm, etc.)
   - How did you feel about where you lived and your experience in general?
   - How did where you grew up influence your opinion on race, education, or housing?
   - Why did you decide to take part in this com-

3. Briefly discuss your reactions to what you've heard:

- What stood out for you in these stories? What was your reaction to listening to others' stories?
- What made you uncomfortable? What did you find you could identify with?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

(30 minutes)

◆ How have you experienced racism personally?

◆ How do you see life opportunities changing in your neighborhood — for better or worse? increasing or decreasing?

◆ How is segregation today different than segregation in the 1960's?

CLOSING

(10 minutes)

△ *Facilitators: At the end of this session, distribute the demographic handout and ask participants to look it over in preparation for next week's session. Also use this time to give a quick overview of the next session and make any announcements.*

❖ What words or phrases from today's discussion do you think you will remember most?

❖ What new insights, awareness, or curiosities do you have as a result of this discussion?

❖ What would you like to see as a direction for next week's discussion?

SESSION TWO

What are the reasons for segregation in the Twin Cities?

TO BEGIN ...

(20 minutes)

1. **Welcome and re-introductions**

   △ *Facilitators: Welcome everyone to the group. Share names around the circle.*

2. **Revisit the discussion guidelines**

   △ *Facilitators: You may want to post flip charts from first session.*

3. **Briefly reflect on last session/ demographic handout**

   △ *Facilitators: Ask the group the following questions:*
   1. *What are some words or phrases that were said at the last session that you remember?*
   2. *What is something important or valuable to share that you remember from looking over the demographics? What stood out to you?*

VIEWPOINTS

(60 minutes)

△ *Facilitators: Read through each of the following viewpoints one at a time out loud as a group. (Ask for volunteers; let participants know it's okay to pass.) After each of the viewpoints is read, ask the following questions:*
- *What are the words or phrases that stood out for you in this viewpoint?*
- *What was your initial reaction while you listened to this viewpoint?*
  PROBE: What does it remind you of or what associations do you have with it?
- *What was a surprise or new information to you?*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

(30 minutes)

△ *Facilitators: Select any of these questions that seem most pertinent to the group, or use them all if time allows.*

♦ What hit your hot button while reading/listening to these viewpoints?

♦ Are there any other viewpoints that should be represented? What's missing?

♦ In your own experience, how influential are some of these reasons for segregation? Are some more than others? Why?

♦ Each viewpoint states a reason for segregation. Which of the viewpoints most likely describes the cause of segregation? Why?

♦ In these viewpoints, what ways of doing something to affect segregation are suggested? What are your own suggestions?

CLOSING

(10 minutes)

△ *Facilitators: Use this time to give a quick overview of the next session and make any announcements.*

❖ What words or phrases from tonight's discussion do you think you will remember most?

❖ What new insights, awareness, or curiosities do you have as a result of this discussion?

❖ What would you like to see as a direction for next week's discussion?

How can we address housing challenges in the Twin Cities?

TO BEGIN ...

(10 minutes)

1. Welcome and re-introductions

   △ *Facilitators: Welcome everyone to the group. Share names around the circle. Also revisit the discussion guidelines if you like.*

2. Briefly reflect on the previous session about the causes of segregation.

   △ *Facilitators: Ask - What are some words or phrases that were said at the last session that you remember?*

VIEWPOINTS

(40 minutes)

△ *Facilitators: Explain that this session focuses on further understanding segregation and presents different options for addressing the housing challenges our city and the region is facing. Read through each of the scenarios one at a time out loud as a group. (Ask for volunteers; let participants know it's okay to pass.) After each of the viewpoints is read, ask the following questions:*
- *What are the words or phrases that stood out for you in this viewpoint?*
- *What was your initial reaction while you listened to this viewpoint?*
  PROBE: What does it remind you of, or what associations do you have with it?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

(60 minutes)

△ *Facilitators: Select any of these questions that seem most pertinent to the group, or use them all if time allows.*

- Which of these perspectives comes closest to your own personal perspective? Why?
  △ *Facilitators: PROBE - What informs your perspective?*

- What hit your hot button while reading/listening to these viewpoints?

- Are there any other viewpoints that should be represented? What's missing?

- What are the strengths of each approach? What are the weaknesses?

- Who would be most affected by each viewpoint? Who do you think would benefit the *most*? The *least*?

- Which of the viewpoints do you feel could work *most* effectively?

- Which of the viewpoints do you feel could work *least* effectively?

- What do you think are some of the barriers to any of these approaches?

- What are some steps that *communities* might be able to take in the area of housing and residential segregation?

- What are some steps that *individuals* might be able to take in the area of housing and residential segregation?

CLOSING

(10 minutes)

△ *Facilitators: Use this time to give a quick overview of the next session and make any announcements.*

- What words or phrases from tonight's discussion do you think you will remember most?

- What new insights, awareness, or curiosities do you have as a result of this discussion?

- What would you like to see as a direction for next week's discussion?

SESSION FOUR

What can we do about the achievement gap in our schools?

TO BEGIN ...

(10 minutes)

1. Welcome and re-introductions

   △ *Facilitators: Welcome everyone to the group. Share names around the circle. Also revisit the discussion guidelines if you like.*

2. Briefly reflect on the previous session about the different options for addressing the challenges of housing and segregation.

   △ *Facilitators: Ask – What are some words or phrases that were said at the last session that you remember?*

VIEWPOINTS

(40 minutes)

△ *Facilitators: Explain that this session focuses on developing a further understanding of education challenges facing our city school district and the entire region – particularly the achievement gap and unequal education opportunities. It may be helpful to review some of the data provided in the demographic handout to give participants a better feel for the issue. Then read through each of the following scenarios one at a time out loud as a group. (Ask for volunteers; let participants know it's okay to pass.)*
- *What are words or phrases that stood out for you?*
- *What was your initial reaction while you listened to this viewpoint?*

   PROBE: What does it remind you of, or what associations do you have with it?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

(60 minutes)

△ *Facilitators: Select any of these questions that seem most pertinent to the group, or use them all if time allows.*

◆ Which of these perspectives comes closest to your own? What life experiences or values inform your perspective?

◆ What hit your hot button while reading/listening to these viewpoints?

◆ Are there any other viewpoints that should be represented? What's missing?

◆ What are the strengths of each perspective? What are the weaknesses?

◆ Who would be most affected by each viewpoint? Who do you think would benefit the *most*? The *least*?

◆ What do you think are some of the barriers to any of these options?

◆ What are some steps that you think might help our communities to address the achievement gap in our schools? What efforts would you like to see policymakers focus on?

◆ What are some steps that individuals might be able to take to address the achievement gap and unequal opportunity in our public schools?

CLOSING

(10 minutes)

△ *Facilitators: Use this time to give a quick overview of the next session and make any announcements.*

❖ What words or phrases from tonight's discussion do you think you will remember most?

❖ What new insights, awareness, or curiosities do you have as a result of this discussion?

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Making a Difference

TO BEGIN ...

(10 minutes)

1. Welcome and re-introductions

   △ *Facilitators: Welcome everyone to the group. Share names around the circle. Also revisit the discussion guidelines if you like.*

2. Briefly reflect on the previous session about the different options for addressing the student achievement gap.

   △ *Facilitators: Ask - What are some words or phrases that were said at the last session that you remember?*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

(60 minutes)

△ *Facilitators: Explain that this session focuses on generating ideas for action that address the challenges of race, housing and education on an individual level, (what we can all do ourselves), a group level (what organizations can do), and a community level (what we can do collectively to impact policy decisions, etc.).*

◆ Thinking back to the previous sessions, were there any common threads that emerged from the group's discussions? Were there any common themes in the solutions you chose for addressing the challenges we discussed?

◆ What were some of the main areas of agreement that were discussed over the last few weeks?

◆ What do you think is the responsibility of the community as a whole to address these challenges?

   △ *Facilitators: PROBE - What is the risk to the community as a whole if we do not address these challenges?*

◆ What is the role of our institutions (schools, city and state governments, Metropolitan Council, the business community, religious groups, neighborhood and community-based organizations, etc.) in addressing these challenges?

   △ *Facilitators: PROBE - How would we like to see these institutions a move forward on these issues? What can we do to influence them?*

IDEAS FOR ACTION

(30 minutes)

While there may not be consensus within your circle about how to best address some of the challenges discussed here, there may be ideas or solutions which have emerged over the past few weeks and are supported by most participants. As a group, try to answer the following question:

◆ What are the three most powerful action steps your group feels would make a difference? (These may range from individual efforts to large-scale initiatives, and could address one or many of the issues discussed.)

△ *Facilitators: You may want to capture these ideas on a flip chart, asking participants to add some detail where needed. Remind the group that it is not necessary for everyone to agree to all the actions. Rather, try to identify ideas which seem to have the most group energy behind them. The ideas identified here should be recorded on the report form for this session and will be used as part of the "Call to Action" forum, the last forum in the Cities at Work series.*

CLOSING

(20 minutes)

△ *Facilitators: After sharing responses to the following questions, ask participants to complete circle dialogue evaluation forms. Remind everyone that this is a pilot project, so their feedback is extremely valuable.*

❖ What has been valuable to you about these circle dialogues?

❖ What do you think you might do differently in the future as a result of being part of this series of dialogues?

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Again, many thanks for all your hard work. We hope this handbook provides you with some guidelines for a productive and provocative community circle.

WHAT IS A COMMUNITY CIRCLE?

A community circle IS:

- a small group discussion involving deliberation and problem solving examined from many perspectives with the help of the members' knowledge and experience. This discussion is often informed by research data and discussion materials, and aided by a facilitator whose job is to manage the discussion.

A community circle IS NOT the same as:

- **a focus group,** a small group usually organized to gather or test information from the members. Participants are often recruited to represent a particular viewpoint or group at a focus group.

- **a facilitated meeting with a predetermined outcome,** a meeting such as a committee or board meeting with goals established ahead of time. *A community circle begins with a shared interest among its members. The dialogue unfolds as the process progresses and is partly guided by its members.*

- **a town meeting,** an official governance process or a large-group meeting drawing attention to a issue.

- **a public hearing,** a large-group public meeting which allows concerns to be aired.

- **a class,** with teachers and pupils, where the teacher or the expert imparts knowledge to students.

A Comparison of Dialogue and Debate

Dialogue is collaborative: two or more sides work together toward common understanding.
Debate is oppositional: two sides oppose each other and attempt to prove each other wrong.

In dialogue, finding common ground is the goal.
In debate, winning is the goal.

In dialogue, one listens to the other side(s) in order to understand, find meaning, and find agreement.
In debate, one listens to the other side in order to find flaws and to counter its arguments.

Dialogue enlarges and possibly changes a participant's point of view.
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Dialogue reveals assumptions for reevaluation.
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Dialogue causes introspection on one's own position.
Debate causes critique of the other position.

Dialogue opens the possibility of reaching a better solution than any of the original solutions.
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Dialogue creates an open-minded attitude: an openness to being wrong and an openness to change.
Debate creates a closed-minded attitude, a determination to be right.

In dialogue, one submits one's best thinking, knowing that other peoples' reflections will help improve it rather than destroy it.
In debate, one submits one's best thinking and defends it against challenge to show that it is right.

Dialogue calls for temporarily suspending one's beliefs.
Debate calls for investing wholeheartedly in one's beliefs.

In dialogue, one searches for basic agreements.
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In dialogue, one searches for strengths in the other positions.
In debate, one searches for flaws and weaknesses in the other positions.

Dialogue involves a real concern for the other person and seeks to not alienate or offend.
Debate involves a countering of the other position without focusing on feelings or relationship and often belittles or deprecates the other person.

Dialogue assumes that many people have pieces of the answer and that together they can put them into a workable solution.
Debate assumes that there is a right answer and that someone has it.

Dialogue remains open-ended.
Debate implies a conclusion.

The Role of Facilitators

- Remain neutral; the facilitator's opinions are not part of the discussion.

- Help the group set its ground rules, and keep to them.

- Help group members grapple with the content by asking probing questions.

- Help group members identify areas of agreement and disagreement.

- Bring in points of view that haven't been talked about.

- Create opportunities for everyone to participate.

- Focus and help to clarify the discussion.

- Summarize key points in the discussion, or ask others to do so.

- Remain objective, monitor process and guide rather than actively participating in the dialogue.

AND

- Become self-aware; good facilitators know their own strengths, weaknesses, "hooks," biases, and values.

- Put the group first.

- Develop a passion for group process with its never-ending variety.

- Appreciate all kinds of people.

- Show commitment to democratic principles.

The Role of Participants

- **Listen carefully to others.** Try to understand the concerns and values that underlie their views.

- **Maintain an open mind.** You don't score points by rigidly sticking to your early statements. Feel free to explore ideas that you have rejected or not considered in the past.

- **Strive to understand the position of those who disagree with you.** Your own knowledge is not complete until you understand other participants' points of view and why they feel the way they do.

- **Help keep the discussion on track.** Make sure your remarks are relevant.

- **Speak your mind freely, but don't monopolize the discussion.** Make sure you are giving others the chance to speak.

- **Address your remarks to the group members rather than the facilitator.** Feel free to address your remarks to a particular participant, especially one who has not been heard from or who you think may have special insight. Don't hesitate to question other participants to learn more about their ideas.

- **Communicate your needs to the facilitator.** The facilitator is responsible for guiding the discussion, summarizing key ideas, and soliciting clarification of unclear points, but he/she may need advice on when this is necessary. Chances are, you are not alone when you don't understand what someone has said.

- **Value your own experience and opinions.** Don't feel pressured to speak, but realize that failing to speak means robbing the group of your wisdom.

- **Engage in friendly disagreement.** Differences can invigorate the group, especially when it is relatively homogeneous on the surface. Don't hesitate to challenge ideas you disagree with, and don't take it personally if someone challenges your ideas.

Suggestions for Discussion Guidelines

◆ Everyone gets a fair hearing.

◆ Seek first to understand, then to be understood.

◆ Share "air time."

◆ If you are offended, say so; and say why.

◆ You can disagree, but don't personalize it; stick to the issue. No name-calling or stereotyping.

◆ Speak for yourself, not for others.

Tips for Effective Facilitation

Be prepared

The facilitator does not need to be an expert on the topic being discussed, but should be the best prepared for the discussion. This means understanding the subject, being familiar with the discussion materials, thinking ahead of time about the directions in which the discussion might go, and preparing questions to help further the discussion.

Set a relaxed and open tone

♦ Welcome everyone and create a friendly relaxed atmosphere.

♦ Well-placed humor is always welcome, and helps to build the group's connections.

Establish clear discussion guidelines

At the beginning of the community circle, help the group establish its own discussion guidelines by asking the participants to suggest ways for the group to behave. (See page 8 for sample guidelines.)

Monitor and assist the group process

♦ Keep track of how the group members are participating - who has spoken, who hasn't spoken, and whose points haven't been heard.

♦ Consider splitting up into smaller groups to examine a variety of viewpoints or to give people a chance to talk more easily about their personal connection to the issue.

♦ When deciding whether to intervene, lean toward non-intervention.

♦ Don't talk after each comment or answer every question; allow participants to respond directly to each other.

♦ Allow time for pauses and silence. People need time to reflect and respond.

♦ Don't let anyone dominate; try to involve everyone.

♦ Remember: a community circle is not a debate, but a group dialogue. If participants forget this, don't hesitate to ask the group to help re-establish the ground rules.

Help the group grapple with the content

♦ Make sure the group considers a wide range of views. Ask the group to think about the advantages and disadvantages of different ways of looking at an issue or solving a problem.

♦ Ask participants to think about the concerns and values that underlie their beliefs and the opinions of others.

♦ Help the discussion along by clarifying, paraphrasing, and summarizing the discussion.

♦ Help participants to identify "common ground", but don't try to force consensus.

Use probing comments and open-ended questions which don't lead to yes or no answers

This will result in a more productive discussion. Some useful questions include:

♦ What seems to be the key point here?

♦ What is the crux of your disagreement?

♦ What would you say to support (or challenge) that point?

♦ Please give an example, or describe a personal experience to illustrate that point.

♦ Could you help us understand the reasons behind your opinion?

♦ What experiences or beliefs might lead a person to support that point of view?

♦ What do you think people who hold that opinion care deeply about?

♦ What would be a strong case against what you just said?

♦ What do you find most persuasive about that point of view?

♦ What is it about that position that you just cannot live with?

♦ What have we missed that we need to talk about?

♦ What information supports that point of view?

Reserve adequate time for closing the discussion

♦ Ask the group for last comments and thoughts about the subject.

♦ Thank everyone for their contributions.

♦ Make any necessary announcements.

♦ Give a quick overview of the next session.

What is the Focused Conversation Method (ORID)?

The Focused Conversation Method (ORID) is simple and natural. To elicit the most participation from everyone in a group, start with an **Objective** or factual question. These are the easiest to answer and allow more introverted or shy personality types to participate. This is the kind of question that is so easy, you can ask everyone to answer, thereby becoming part of the discussion. The next level of question, **Reflective**, involves getting more in touch with our feelings and takes the conversation a little deeper. Some people don't respond easily to talking about their feelings, so asking for associations is another way to bring forth this level of conversation. The third level is the **Interpretive**, or meaning seeking, analyzing stage of a conversation. Much of our society tends to go immediately to this level of discussion. It is a rich stage in any conversation. Unfortunately, many people get left out of active participation when we go here too fast. That's why this is the third level of questions we suggest, not the first. The last level is **Decisional** which is really asking about your personal relationship to what's been said so far, what comes next and how you will apply what you have learned in the conversation. It is the action oriented or "where do we go from here?" stage. You can have as many or as few questions at each level as you want or need.

Most people gravitate to or have a preference to a particular stage of conversation. By creating questions that address each of the stages, you increase the likelihood of greater participation by group members.

These stages occur naturally in any good discussion where everyone is involved. We want to give you a guide for designing an effective discussion that will involve the entire group. Within the basic format there are numerous ways to create questions. Feel free to alter them to suit your own personal style.

Suggestions for Dealing with Typical Challenges

Most community circles go smoothly because participants are there voluntarily and have a stake in the program. But there are challenges in any group process. What follows are some of the most common difficulties that community circle leaders encounter, along with some possible ways to deal with those difficulties.

Problem:
Certain participants don't say anything, seem shy.

Possible responses: Try to draw out quiet participants, but don't put them on the spot. Make eye contact - it reminds them that you'd like to hear from them. Look for nonverbal cues that indicate participants are ready to speak. Frequently, people will feel more comfortable in later sessions of a community circle program and will begin to participate. When someone comes forward with a brief comment after staying in the background for most of the community circle, you can encourage him or her by conveying genuine interest and asking for more information. And it's always helpful to talk with people informally before and after the session.

Problem:
An aggressive or talkative person dominates the discussion.

Possible responses: As the facilitator, it is your responsibility to handle domineering participants. Once it becomes clear what this person is doing, you *must* intervene and set limits. Start by limiting your eye contact with the speaker. Remind the group that everyone is invited to participate - "Let's hear from some folks who haven't had a chance to speak yet." If necessary, you can speak to the person by name. "Charlie, we've heard from you; now let's hear what Barbara has to say." Be careful to manage your comments and tone of voice - you are trying to make a point without offending the speaker.

Problem:
Lack of focus, not moving forward, participants wander off the topic.

Possible responses: Responding to this takes judgment and intuition. It is the facilitator's role to help move the discussion along. But it is not always clear which way it is going. Keep an eye on the participants to see how engaged they are, and if you are in doubt, check it out with the group. "We're a little off the topic right now. Would you like to stay with this, or move on to the next question?" If a participant goes into a lengthy digression, you may have to say: "We are wandering off the subject, and I'd like to give others a chance to speak."

Problem:

Someone puts forth information which you know to be false. Or, participants get hung up in a dispute about facts, but no one present knows the answer.

Possible responses: Ask, "Has anyone heard conflicting information?" If no one offers a correction, offer one yourself. And if no one knows the facts, and the point is central to the discussion, encourage members to look up the information before the next meeting. Remind the group that experts often disagree.

Problem:

Lack of interest, no excitement, no one wants to talk, only a few people participating.

Possible responses: This rarely happens in community circles, but it may occur if the facilitator talks too much or does not give participants enough time to respond to questions. People need time to think, reflect, and get ready to speak up. It may help to pose a question and go around the circle until everyone has a chance to respond. Occasionally, you might have a lack of excitement in the discussion because the group seems to be in agreement and isn't coming to grips with the tensions inherent in the issue. In this case the leader's job is to try to bring other views into the discussion, especially if no one in the group holds them. "Do you know people who hold other views? What would they say about our conversation?"

Problem:

Tension or open conflict in the group. Perhaps two participants lock horns and argue. Or, one participant gets angry and confronts another.

Possible responses: If there is tension, address it directly. Remind participants that disagreement and conflict of ideas is what a community circle is all about. Explain that, for conflict to be productive, it must be focused on the issue; it is acceptable to challenge someone's ideas, but personal attacks are not acceptable. You must interrupt personal attacks, name-calling, or put-downs as soon as they occur. You will be better able to do so if you have established ground rules that disallow such behaviors and encourage tolerance for all views. Don't hesitate to appeal to the group for help; if group members bought into the ground rules, they will support you. As a last resort, consider taking a break to change the energy in the room. You can take the opportunity to talk one-on-one with the participants in question.

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Adapted from a paper prepared by Shelley Berman, which was based on discussions of the Dialogue Group of the Boston Chapter of Educators for Social Responsibility (ESR).

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♦ Help group members grapple with the content by asking probing questions.

♦ Help group members identify areas of agreement and disagreement.

♦ Bring in points of view that haven't been talked about.

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♦ Become self-aware; good facilitators know their own strengths, weaknesses, "hooks," biases, and values.

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Set a Relaxed and Open Tone

◆ Welcome everyone and create a friendly relaxed atmosphere.

◆ Well-placed humor is always welcome, and helps to build the group's connections.

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At the beginning of the community circle, help the group establish its own discussion guidelines by asking the participants to suggest ways for the group to behave. (See page 8 for sample guidelines.)

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◆ Keep track of how the group members are participating - who has spoken, who hasn't spoken, and whose points haven't been heard.

◆ Consider splitting up into smaller groups to examine a variety of viewpoints or to give people a chance to talk more easily about their personal connection to the issue.

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◆ Allow time for pauses and silence. People need time to reflect and respond.

◆ Don't let anyone dominate; try to involve everyone.

◆ Remember: a community circle is not a debate, but a group dialogue. If participants forget this, don't hesitate to ask the group to help re-establish the ground rules.

Help the Group Grapple with the Content

♦ Make sure the group considers a wide range of views. Ask the group to think about the advantages and disadvantages of different ways of looking at an issue or solving a problem.

♦ Ask participants to think about the concerns and values that underlie their beliefs and the opinions of others.

♦ Help the discussion along by clarifying, paraphrasing, and summarizing the discussion.

♦ Help participants to identify "common ground", but don't try to force consensus.

Use Probing Comments and Open-ended Questions Which Don't Lead to Yes or No Answers.

This will result in a more productive discussion. Some useful questions include:

♦ What seems to be the key point here?

♦ What is the crux of your disagreement?

♦ What would you say to support (or challenge) that point?

♦ Please give an example, or describe a personal experience to illustrate that point.

♦ Could you help us understand the reasons behind your opinion?

♦ What experiences or beliefs might lead a person to support that point of view?

♦ What do you think people who hold that opinion care deeply about?

♦ What would be a strong case against what you just said?

♦ What do you find most persuasive about that point of view?

♦ What is it about that position that you just cannot live with?

♦ What have we missed that we need to talk about?

♦ What information supports that point of view?

Reserve Adequate Time for Closing the Discussion

♦ Ask the group for last comments and thoughts about the subject.

♦ Thank everyone for their contributions.

♦ Make any necessary announcements.

♦ Give a quick overview of the next session.

Suggestions for
Dealing with Typical Challenges

Most community circles go smoothly because participants are there voluntarily and have a stake in the program. But there are challenges in any group process. What follows are some of the most common difficulties that community circle leaders encounter, along with some possible ways to deal with those difficulties.

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Possible responses: Try to draw out quiet participants, but don't put them on the spot. Make eye contact - it reminds them that you'd like to hear from them. Look for nonverbal cues that indicate participants are ready to speak. Frequently, people will feel more comfortable in later sessions of a community circle program and will begin to participate. When someone comes forward with a brief comment after staying in the background for most of the community circle, you can encourage him or her by conveying genuine interest and asking for more information. And it's always helpful to talk with people informally before and after the session.

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Problem:

Someone puts forth information which you know to be false. Or, participants get hung up in a dispute about facts, but no one present knows the answer.

Possible responses: Ask, "Has anyone heard conflicting information?" If no one offers a correction, offer one yourself. And if no one knows the facts, and the point is central to the discussion, encourage members to look up the information before the next meeting. Remind the group that experts often disagree.

Problem:

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Possible responses: This rarely happens in community circles, but it may occur if the facilitator talks too much or does not give participants enough time to respond to questions. People need time to think, reflect, and get ready to speak up. It may help to pose a question and go around the circle until everyone has a chance to respond. Occasionally, you might have a lack of excitement in the discussion because the group seems to be in agreement and isn't coming to grips with the tensions inherent in the issue. In this case the leader's job is to try to bring other views into the discussion, especially if no one in the group holds them. "Do you know people who hold other views? What would they say about our conversation?"

Problem:

Tension or open conflict in the group. Perhaps two participants lock horns and argue. Or, one participant gets angry and confronts another.

Possible responses: If there is tension, address it directly. Remind participants that disagreement and conflict of ideas is what a community circle is all about. Explain that, for conflict to be productive, it must be focused on the issue; it is acceptable to challenge someone's ideas, but personal attacks are not acceptable. You must interrupt personal attacks, name-calling, or put-downs as soon as they occur. You will be better able to do so if you have established ground rules that disallow such behaviors and encourage tolerance for all views. Don't hesitate to appeal to the group for help; if group members bought into the ground rules, they will support you. As a last resort, consider taking a break to change the energy in the room. You can take the opportunity to talk one-on-one with the participants in question.

Community Circle Report Form
Sessions #1-4

Sponsoring Organization: _____ Date: _____

Session: ___#1 ___#2 ___#3 ___#4   Number of Participants (today): _____

Facilitator: _____ Co-Facilitator (if any) _____

Scribe: _____

****

Please describe two or three main themes/ideas which your group discussed today: *(1-2 sentences each)*

1. _____

_____

_____

_____

2. _____

_____

_____

_____

3. _____

_____

_____

_____

4. **Please use this space to note action ideas, if any, that were mentioned in today's discussion:**

_____

_____

_____

_____

Community Circle Report Form
Session #5

Sponsoring Organization: _____ *Date:* _____

Session: ___#1 ___#2 ___#3 ___#4 *Number of Participants (today):* _____

Facilitator: _____ *Co-Facilitator (if any)* _____

Scribe: _____

****

While there may not be consensus within your group about how to best address some of the challenges discussed, there may be ideas or solutions which have emerged over the last few weeks and are supported by most participants.

What are two or three of the most powerful steps our community could take to address the challenges discussed? (These may range from individual efforts to large-scale initiatives, and may address one or many of the issues discussed.)

1. _____

   _____

   _____

   _____

   _____

2. _____

   _____

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   _____

3. _____

   _____

   _____

   _____

   _____

4. **What are some of the things participants said they would do differently in the future as a result of being part of this community circle dialogue?**

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Facilitator's Handbook

Resources for facilitating community circle discussions

CONTENTS

A note to facilitators

Welcome and thank you for joining this community circle project. Your time and commitment are very valuable contributions to the success of this project.

The materials in this handbook have been developed as suggested reference tools to help you monitor and facilitate your circle discussion. Many of these materials have been adapted from other sources. You are welcome to photocopy whatever you would like from this handbook to share with your group.

Again, many thanks for all your hard work. We hope this handbook provides you with some guidelines for a productive and provocative community circle.

WHAT IS A COMMUNITY CIRCLE?

A community circle IS:

- a small group discussion involving deliberation and problem solving examined from many perspectives with the help of the members' knowledge and experience. This discussion is often informed by research data and discussion materials, and aided by a facilitator whose job is to manage the discussion.

A community circle IS NOT the same as:

- **a focus group,** a small group usually organized to gather or test information from the members. Participants are often recruited to represent a particular viewpoint or group at a focus group.

- **a facilitated meeting with a predetermined outcome,** a meeting such as a committee or board meeting with goals established ahead of time. *A community circle begins with a shared interest among its members. The dialogue unfolds as the process progresses and is partly guided by its members.*

- **a town meeting,** an official governance process or a large-group meeting drawing attention to a issue.

- **a public hearing,** a large-group public meeting which allows concerns to be aired.

- **a class,** with teachers and pupils, where the teacher or the expert imparts knowledge to students.

A Comparison of Dialogue and Debate

Dialogue is collaborative: two or more sides work together toward common understanding.
Debate is oppositional: two sides oppose each other and attempt to prove each other wrong.

In dialogue, finding common ground is the goal.
In debate, winning is the goal.

In dialogue, one listens to the other side(s) in order to understand, find meaning, and find agreement.
In debate, one listens to the other side in order to find flaws and to counter its arguments.

Dialogue enlarges and possibly changes a participant's point of view.
Debate affirms a participant's own point of view.

Dialogue reveals assumptions for reevaluation.
Debate defends assumptions as truth.

Dialogue causes introspection on one's own position.
Debate causes critique of the other position.

Dialogue opens the possibility of reaching a better solution than any of the original solutions.
Debate defends one's own positions as the best solution and excludes other solutions.

Dialogue creates an open-minded attitude: an openness to being wrong and an openness to change.
Debate creates a closed-minded attitude, a determination to be right.

In dialogue, one submits one's best thinking, knowing that other peoples' reflections will help improve it rather than destroy it.
In debate, one submits one's best thinking and defends it against challenge to show that it is right.

Dialogue calls for temporarily suspending one's beliefs.
Debate calls for investing wholeheartedly in one's beliefs.

In dialogue, one searches for basic agreements.
In debate, one searches for glaring differences.

In dialogue, one searches for strengths in the other positions.
In debate, one searches for flaws and weaknesses in the other positions.

Dialogue involves a real concern for the other person and seeks to not alienate or offend.
Debate involves a countering of the other position without focusing on feelings or relationship and often belittles or deprecates the other person.

Dialogue assumes that many people have pieces of the answer and that together they can put them into a workable solution.
Debate assumes that there is a right answer and that someone has it.

Dialogue remains open-ended.
Debate implies a conclusion.

Adapted from a paper prepared by Shelley Berman, which was based on discussions of the Dialogue Group of the Boston Chapter of Educators for Social Responsibility (ESR).

The Role of Facilitators

♦ Remain neutral; the facilitator's opinions are not part of the discussion.

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What is the Focused Conversation Method (ORID)?

The Focused Conversation Method (ORID) is simple and natural. To elicit the most participation from everyone in a group, start with an **Objective** or factual question. These are the easiest to answer and allow more introverted or shy personality types to participate. This is the kind of question that is so easy, you can ask everyone to answer, thereby becoming part of the discussion. The next level of question, **Reflective**, involves getting more in touch with our feelings and takes the conversation a little deeper. Some people don't respond easily to talking about their feelings, so asking for associations is another way to bring forth this level of conversation. The third level is the **Interpretive**, or meaning seeking, analyzing stage of a conversation. Much of our society tends to go immediately to this level of discussion. It is a rich stage in any conversation. Unfortunately, many people get left out of active participation when we go here too fast. That's why this is the third level of questions we suggest, not the first. The last level is **Decisional** which is really asking about your personal relationship to what's been said so far, what comes next and how you will apply what you have learned in the conversation. It is the action oriented or "where do we go from here?" stage. You can have as many or as few questions at each level as you want or need.

Most people gravitate to or have a preference to a particular stage of conversation. By creating questions that address each of the stages, you increase the likelihood of greater participation by group members.

These stages occur naturally in any good discussion where everyone is involved. We want to give you a guide for designing an effective discussion that will involve the entire group. Within the basic format there are numerous ways to create questions. Feel free to alter them to suit your own personal style.

Suggestions for Dealing with Typical Challenges

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