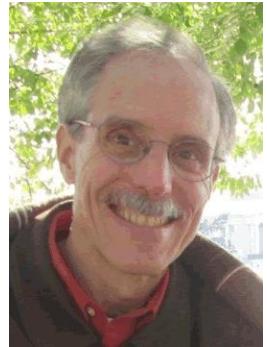


# Using a Circle Process to Help with Deep Listening; “Paths of Renewed Encounter”

by John Holden  
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*“In many parts of the world, there is a need for paths of peace to heal open wounds. There is also a need for peacemakers, men and women prepared to work boldly and creatively to initiate processes of healing and renewed encounter.”*  
(Pope Francis, “Fratelli Tutti,” 225)

The last couple of years have been filled with challenging, impactful events in our world. At all levels -- in our families, our neighborhoods, our countries -- we would benefit from practices that help us to listen more deeply to each other. An example of such a practice is a 'circle process,' which is derived from Indigenous teachings and other wisdom traditions and is rooted in an understanding of profound interconnectedness. In this process, participants arrange themselves in a circle around a centerpiece, facing each other. A 'talking piece' is used to grant the person holding it the sole right to speak, without interruption. The talking piece is passed from person to person in one direction around the rim of the circle, assuring that each person has the opportunity to speak, one at a time. The talking piece allows those who are not holding it to focus on listening and to not be distracted by thinking about an immediate response. After an opening and check-in, members of a circle explore together and adopt a set of values and guidelines for how they want to be together in their circle. Today, circles are used for many different purposes, including to build community, address conflict, or make group decisions through consensus. (Note: A circle process has been used by the Death Penalty Abolition and Restorative Justice Issue Team, as well as the MSJC Steering Committee, to help facilitate discussion and sharing. This aligns with one of the vision statements adopted by the MSJC Steering Committee in 2019: “We will promote the widespread use of restorative justice principles and practices within MSJC, Marianist communities and Marianist ministries. Our hope is that embracing restorative justice will facilitate better sharing, listening, peacemaking and conflict resolution.”)

In a circle, one or two "circle keepers" serve as facilitators of sorts -- not directing the group, but working to maintain the collective space and to stimulate reflection. This is an important role that requires preparation for each circle. I am grateful for the opportunity two months ago to be one of 19 people from across the country who participated in a four-day “Circle Keeper Training” in Chicago. The training was co-sponsored by Precious Blood Ministry of Reconciliation (PBMR) and Catholic Mobilizing Network (CMN) and was led by two outstanding trainers who are PBMR staff members. Among the many lessons from the training was the necessity to build trust and to assist circle participants in creating a safe space in which each person can speak and listen from the heart. As I observe and reflect on our world today, it seems that these elements -- trust, respect, safe space, listening -- would be helpful to address a range of needs and situations in our homes, ministries, and communities.

An exciting development in recent months, complementary to the circle process, is the release of a new restorative justice resource created by CMN. The guide, titled *Paths of Renewed Encounter: A Restorative Justice Engagement Guide for Catholic Communities*, echoes many of the themes in Pope Francis' third encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*. \* As noted in the guide's introduction, “CMN created *Paths of Renewed Encounter* to further prepare people for Gospel-

centered responses to harm that enable personal, communal, and systemic transformation.” You are encouraged to read and consider this excellent resource, which is [available from CMN](#) in both print and electronic formats. (Congratulations and thanks go to CMN Director of Restorative Justice, Caitlin Morneau, and to all who contributed to creating the guide!)

\* *Paths of Renewed Encounter* is also the title of Chapter Seven of [\*Fratelli Tutti\*](#). The entire chapter by Pope Francis is recommended for reading and reflection.