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## **Circles of Support and Accountability:**

### **A Prophetic Ministry for Communities of Faith**

by **Bruce A. Kittle**

I am a "community" chaplain with the Sixth Judicial District Department of Correctional Services, an organization that provides adult probation and parole for six counties in east-central Iowa. Our jurisdiction is both rural and urban and includes very small communities as well as two of our state's larger urban centers. I am not only responsible for some of the traditional duties of a chaplain, including providing pastoral care and religious programming for clients and staff: I also help guide and deepen our organization's efforts in the field of restorative justice.

My task includes working with victims of crime, and the community, to identify the harm caused by criminal behavior and then assisting those affected to develop responses and interventions that help individuals, families, and the community—and also those who have offended—to move toward healing and restoration. Depending on the people involved, I may also help individuals attend to the theological issues that arise within this context. One aspect of this work involves networking with faith communities to match them with high-risk offenders returning from prison to the community in a program we call "Circles of Support and Accountability" (CSAs).

#### **Circle**

"Circle" is one example of a value-based process we call restorative dialogue. All forms of restorative dialogue are founded on the principles of restorative justice and adhere to two core principles: 1) listening when others speak (which includes listening with empathy, an open mind, and without judgment) and 2) speaking your truth (which includes speaking honestly, from the heart, and with respectful words that do no harm).

Other examples of restorative dialogue include victim-offender mediation or conferencing, and family group conferencing. From these restorative dialogue practices, and based on the work over thousands of years of many native peoples, came the practice of Circle.

In Circle, people sit in a circle facing each other, all input is valued, speaking is moderated through the use of a "talking piece" (the holder of the piece becomes the current speaker) and the basic principles noted above, and decision-making is consensual.

Circle can be used simply to facilitate conversation around various issues (i.e., "Talking Circles"), or it can be used to respond to specific conflict situations (i.e., "Peacemaking Circles"). Circle is essentially a different way of communicating and being with each other. It focuses on speaking from the heart, being respectful of all people, and honoring the wisdom that lies within us. For many native people, Circle is more than a dialogue process: it is a way of life.

Circle usually includes some type of ritual, depending on the group and the practices the circle members are comfortable with. These rituals can include lighting a candle, reflective silence, using a reading or prayer, "smudging" to assist with spiritual cleansing, and the use of a talking piece (so that all have the opportunity to speak, when they have the talking piece, but no one is required to speak, as it is always okay to pass).

## How CSAs work

Circles of Support and Accountability are based on the general Circle model, but are tailored specifically to meet the needs of those who have offended and are seeking to re-enter the community. The technique originated in Canada around 1994, when some prison chaplains and other members of faith communities came together in response to a problem with the release of high-risk sex offenders. They discovered that certain high-risk sex offenders could be held to the end of their sentence/detention but then released into the community without any supervision by Correctional Services Canada (CSC). It was felt that this situation was unacceptable and only created the opportunity for re-offending and the creation of more victims.

In response to these concerns, small groups of trained volunteers began to meet with paroled offenders who were not under CSC supervision. Their purpose was to offer assistance on the issues of support and accountability. These efforts eventually became known as Circles of Support and Accountability. From this beginning, CSAs have spread and are now being used in various contexts around the United States and Canada.

### VALUES OF RESTORATIVE JUSTICE

1. Offending behavior/crime injures people and communities. Justice should focus on increasing understanding, healing, and the restoration of harm, including economic, emotional, physical, social, psychological, and spiritual injuries.
2. All human beings are of value, have strengths, and contain the potential for healing, growth, and change. Thus inclusiveness, respect and advocacy for diversity, and a recognition of our common humanity, are essential in all practices.
3. Choice, opportunities for input and participation, and sensitivity for person(s) affected by offending behavior/crime are crucial to defining the harm and how it might be restored or responded to.
4. The direct participation of those most affected by offending behavior is essential to its resolution, including the community, the person(s) harmed, and those who have offended.
5. Offending behavior creates obligations for individuals, communities, and the government.
6. Accountability means understanding the harm caused by one's behavior and taking steps to repair the harm and make amends.

The CSA model we use in our jurisdiction focuses on high-risk offenders and often includes issues of addiction. We take referrals from Probation/Parole Officers (PPO) through an application form. After the form is completed by the "Core Member" it is reviewed by the PPO and then again in a screening interview with the PPO and program coordinator. The program is voluntary but very demanding; thus it is important that Core Members understand the nature of CSA and what expectations will be placed upon them once they begin. We stress the focus on restorative justice and accountability, and carefully explain the Circle process.

Once a Core Member has been approved for a CSA, we start by asking whom they would like to include as a part of their Circle. We hope to find two to four prosocial family members or friends who can be brought into the Circle to help. Regrettably, many of the men and women we work with do not have a single family member or friend who is appropriate for their CSA. Thus we often need to rely on the broader community to fill in (a process I explain more fully below). After identifying the people from the Core Member's life who can participate, we add related service professionals including the PPO, as well as contacts from employment, housing, education, or other important aspects of the individual's life. Our goal is to surround the Core Member with supportive people from all aspects of his or her life, with whom the Member is in positive relationship and who not only can offer support, but also can help with accountability.

Once these people are recruited, we seek a location for the Circle. Often this is where the faith community comes in. While many Core Members do not have any religious affiliation, they are usually open to basing their CSA in a faith community. This is a definite strength for this work, because a faith community provides a pool of potential volunteers as well as other resources to bring to the CSA (which is exactly what is needed). Typically we add three to five members from a faith community to a CSA, including the pastor if possible. The extent to which the issues of faith and spirituality are brought up and addressed in Circle are up to the members within the Circle, as CSAs in our program are "content neutral"—that is, they do not require or advocate a belief in any particular faith or tradition. While tending to the spiritual needs of the Core Member is an important part of recovery, people are accepted as they are, wherever that may be spiritually.

After the CSA is put together and the initial orientation and training are completed with the volunteers, the first full Circle is held, with all members present. The Circle is opened by what we call the "Keeper" of the Circle. This is the individual who opens and closes Circle, and who helps keep the dialogue moving through summarizing and asking questions after each pass of the talking piece. Once the opening rituals are completed, the first pass of the talking piece is usually a general check-in for everyone, with the Core Member sitting to the immediate right of the Keeper (since the talking piece travels clockwise, this allows the Core member to speak at the end of each pass).

In the beginning the Circle process is focused on developing the CSA Covenant, an agreement created by all members of the Circle about their expectations, goals, and pledges of responsibility (including confidentiality) to each other and the Circle process. This helps define clearly how people will be relating to each other and what they hope to accomplish. After this is completed and all members of the Circle have signed the CSA Covenant, the Circle turns to addressing the situation of the Core Member. This usually includes Core Members telling their life stories and recounting what they did to get to this point in their life. This kind of open disclosure helps build trust and lays the groundwork for working toward the overall goals of a CSA, which is to offer both support and accountability.

### **Support and accountability**

By "support" we really mean building new prosocial relationships. Offenders often return to our communities without friends, without supportive family, and without the financial and social connections to survive. Once

#### 7. A restorative approach seeks:

- increased competencies, reintegration, restoration, and support for all persons affected by offending behavior/crime
- increased community safety through stronger relationships
- opportunity for Restorative Dialogue where safe and appropriate.

8. Shared responsibility and accountability are built on shared input and decision-making by all parties and affected communities.

alienated from prosocial influences within our communities, they connect with others who, like them, have been alienated from our society. This typically includes other individuals who have offended and are struggling to make it. Without prosocial relationships and support, it is not long until crime, or at least the use of drugs or alcohol, becomes a viable alternative and the destructive cycle begins again.

Support in this context means identifying roadblocks and obstacles the offender will face upon re-entry, including issues such as housing, employment, education, treatment, getting a driver's license, etc. By working through these issues the CSA can help the offender design realistic strategies for overcoming these difficulties. Insights and comments from prosocial friends, developed in the trusting and nurturing environment of the CSA, can help provide needed perspective to help avoid new offenses and the creation of situations where re-offending may be more likely.

Accountability in a CSA has two aspects. First, we look at the impact a person's behavior has had on his or her victim(s) and the community (as well as the Core Member's own family) to help offenders understand the human consequences of their behavior. Sometimes this will mean including the victim(s) in Circle. Victims are always invited to participate in some way if they want to. If the direct victim(s) chooses not to participate, we might invite other victims of similar crimes to come to Circle and speak to the Core Member about the crime they suffered and how they were affected. Again, the idea is to help offenders understand the human consequences of their crime in a safe way, so that they can move toward accepting responsibility.<sup>[1]</sup> Second, we work with the Core Member (with input from the victim if possible) to develop a plan for addressing how the harm caused can be repaired and what the Core Member can do to take responsibility and make amends for what he or she has done.

The other aspect of accountability is simply living an accountable life. Is the Core Member doing everything that should be done, on a day-to-day basis, to be a responsible citizen? Many Core Members have never lived successfully in community and must learn how to do so. The Circle helps them do this step by step, in a setting that is supportive and nurturing while at the same time firm and direct. While this may sound easy, it is not. In fact it is very difficult work, for both the Core Member and for the other members of Circle, and is only possible in the trusting and safe environment of Circle.

### **Our experience**

While we have been working with the CSA model for two or three years, the practice is still relatively new and acceptance by correctional staff, while growing, is still an issue. In our work we have used CSAs in juvenile cases, with Circle meeting one to three times and lasting one to six months; as well as with adult high-risk offenders in CSAs meeting regularly for up to two years. In one CSA we just completed nineteen months of work. In this instance the Core Member had spent twenty-one of forty-two years of his life incarcerated on eight OWI charges when he entered Circle. While he came with many potential strengths, his alcoholism and severe level of "institutionalism" (based on years of incarceration) made it extremely difficult for him to survive out in the community on his own. Over the nineteen months in a CSA he has had three relapses, but for the most part is doing very well. He is employed in a steady job, has built some solid relationships, and is learning to function in society with all the normal responsibilities we all deal with regularly.

### **The journey has not been without hardships.**

We have struggled with building trust, with being honest in all activities, and with dealing with the pain and fear of failure as well as with success (made even more difficult by the issues of addiction and relapse). Being in intimate relationship with another person as he walks through the long journey of healing old wounds is difficult work, one that challenges each member of the Circle on an individual level. For it is impossible to sit in Circle with another, and hear his struggles and fights, without having to see your own difficulties and dealing with them as well. This leads to healing for all members of the Circle, for it touches the humanity within each of us. As one of our community volunteers recently explained, "Being in Circle has made me a better person."

So it is we approach healing and restoration, one Circle at a time, one Core Member at a time, one victim at a time, all within one community at a time. It is a slow, relationally focused effort, but one infused and energized

by the spirit that can lead to healing and restoration for all involved.

But as we walk this path—particularly with our native brothers and sisters, many of whom live Circle as a way of life—we non-natives face several telling issues. Will we allow ourselves to enter into the “spirit” of Circle (and restorative justice values and practices) deeply enough that it becomes more than just another conflict resolution process? Might we allow this to touch our souls, to change and transform us, so that it becomes part of who we are and how we relate to each other? Might it even help us define what we understand it is to be human? “Circle,” the journey, has begun—but how far will we go, and how can our faith and communities help us to get there?

Bruce A. Kittle, J.D., M.Div., is Chaplain and Supervisor with the Sixth Judicial District Department of Correctional Services in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. He works with Youth Development and Restorative Justice Programs and lives with his wife and two children on a small farm near Iowa City, Iowa. He can be contacted at [bruce.kittle@doc.state.ia.us](mailto:bruce.kittle@doc.state.ia.us).

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[1] Victims who want to be involved have many choices, including doing nothing, writing an impact statement, doing a VOC, sitting in Circle, or getting their own “Healing Circle” started. Restorative justice is based on victim sensitivity and choice.