

Having Hard Conversations

Using Listening Circles

Many churches claim the title “Purple Church,” suggesting that their members from both sides of the political spectrum worship in harmony. For when you mix red with blue you get purple. However, more often than not, red and blue members live in harmony not because they have come together in a shared belief, but rather because they avoid all conversations around divisive issues. Fear of causing disruption or splitting the church keeps us from approaching hot button issues within the church. And by doing so, we miss a beautiful opportunity to really become purple – a purple that represents the ultimate act of love and sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

If we cannot find a way to have these hard conversations within the church, within a community based on unconditional love and acceptance, we never will. The following is a step-by-step process to use listening circles within your church to begin fostering understanding and interconnectedness. May your circle be a healing place to practice the Great Commandment,

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second like it, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

History

Listening circles originated with indigenous cultures of North America and Africa. Sometimes called talking or peace circles, they were used for conflict resolution, decision making, and healing within a community. To ensure every member of the community was heard, a “talking stick” was passed from member to member.

Purpose

Unlike debates or dialogues, the purpose of a listening circle is simply to listen – and through empathetic listening, to build community. Circles can also be used to restore justice and to provide healing and support. Ultimately, listening circles create space where participants can share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences without fear of judgment or interruption.

Preparation

It is important that everyone understands the purpose of your circle before beginning. No one should be pressured to participate. Create a physical space that is free from distractions. Pull chairs into a circle, avoid tables that cause distance between members. Prepare a centerpiece that can serve as a focal point during the circle. A simple lit candle representing the Holy Spirit’s presence would be a good place to start. You could add other pieces as appropriate (Bible, cross, or items special to your group). Decide what your “talking stick” will be (a literal stick, stuffed animal, wooden hand cross). Ideally a circle will have 8-10 members and last an hour. If you have more people, create a second circle or expand your current circle and add time to make sure everyone is heard.

The Circle in 10 Steps

1. Once everyone is seated, welcome them to the circle.
2. Open with a ritual – prayer and candle lighting.
 - a. Loving God, we come together with open hearts and minds. Guide us to listen with compassion, speak with honesty, and honor each voice shared here today. May this circle be a space of peace, respect, and unity. Amen.
3. Explain the purpose of the circle. Whether it's for healing, conflict resolution, community building, or sharing different viewpoints, having a clearly defined purpose helps participants align their intentions with the group's goals.
4. Introduce the talking stick. Only the person holding the stick is allowed to talk. If the stick is passed to you and you do not have anything to say, pause before passing it to the next person, allowing everyone a moment to reflect.
5. Set guidelines for the circle.
 - a. Confidentiality
 - b. Respectful listening
 - c. Speak from personal experience only (I statements)
 - d. Full participation (while it is ok to pass once, we want everyone to share at least once as well)
 - e. Honor all feelings and perspectives
 - f. Set a time limit for each question (3 minutes/person)
6. Get consensus from the group about these guidelines by passing the talking stick.
 - a. As the stick is passed to each person, invite them to voice their commitment to the guidelines and the circle process. ("I agree to the guidelines set for this circle.") This also gives everyone a chance to hold the talking stick before the circle fully begins.
7. Ask the first question: What is on your mind?
 - a. Pass the stick around the circle.
8. Ask the second question: How do you feel now?
 - a. Pass the stick around the circle.
9. Ask the third question: What will you take away?
 - a. Pass the stick around the circle.
10. Close with a ritual - Lord's Prayer said in unison.
 - a. Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.
 - b. Change the light - extinguish the candle. Let this smoke be a reminder that God is with us wherever we go, in whatever we do, for the light of Christ lives within each of us.

Personal Example

During the summer of 2020, racial unrest and political divides dominated the news. Youth were struggling with digital school and social distancing. It seemed that we had all forgotten how to be together. Months of Zoom youth groups and masked outdoor games had created a heartbreaking divide within our youth group. Once it was safe to meet in person, I didn't even know where to begin. There was so much tension lingering on the periphery, I wasn't sure how to address the events of the last year in a helpful, honest manner.

I turned to the Georgia Conflict Center for support. They had been doing restorative justice work in our schools for years. Many of my youth group members had already participated in circles at school and were familiar with the overall concept. While circles had some push back in the schools, I was hopeful that in the warmth of our church family, they could be a healing place to begin rebuilding our community.

On a Sunday night, I gathered our high schoolers in a circle. I explained the purpose, lit a candle and took a deep breath. We used a koosh ball as the talking stick. From the very first moment, I felt a shift in the room. Silliness vanished, as youth vulnerably shared how the last year had impacted them and their faith. There were tears. There were some who passed and never spoke yet were just as present as others. There were many different opinions expressed, but there was no arguing. And there was no discounting of one another's experience. From both red and blue families, we heard stories of pain and loss. We learned that many youth felt like outsiders, unsure where they fit within their own families, as well as the larger community.

Brave souls admitted not fully understanding what was going on at the national level as they felt protected in a safe bubble. Others expressed feeling attacked and unsure of who to trust. In the final round, we saw glimpses of hope and moments of joy. Youth were taking away a reminder that they were loved by each other. They were taking away a new awareness of the other side, and a grace to seek commonalities over differences in the future. As I watched the koosh ball make its final way around the circle, I could feel the youth lean into each other, into the circle. The circle ended with a reminder that we do not have to agree on all things. All we need to get through these hard times is to remember God's commandment to love God and love one another. If we can do that, all the rest will work itself out.

When the circle ended. It ended. There was no debrief. We did not continue the conversation outside of the circle. Youth were dismissed to reflect on all they had heard and felt. I believe they left feeling a little lighter and a lot closer. Just the simple act of providing space for youth to share their thoughts without interruption or comment is powerful.

We have revisited the circle a few more times over the years – after a school shooting, in response to a local tragedy, and following a major disagreement within the group. In each case, the listening circle brought us closer to each other and to God. I hope you find this tool helpful as we navigate a changing world. Through listening circles may we truly become a Purple Church, a purple based on spiritual wealth and the love of Jesus.

Additional Resources

- Georgia Conflict Center www.gaconflict.org
- International Institute for Restorative Practices www.iirp.edu
- The Circle Center www.thecirclecenter.com



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