

SACRED GROUND

Dialogue on Race and Faith

ORGANIZING A SACRED GROUND CIRCLE

Determining Group Size

The ideal group size is 8–12 people, including two facilitators. If more people are interested, consider forming multiple circles that may occasionally come together for larger gatherings. A consistent group of participants and a commitment to regular attendance help foster a deeper, more meaningful experience.

Where to Meet

Sacred Ground works well both in person and on Zoom, with benefits and drawbacks to each format, so consider what will work better in your context. Online meetings are often more accessible and make long-distance circles possible, while in-person gatherings can foster a more intimate experience, allow for longer sessions, and support those who struggle with technology.

If meeting online, keep sessions to a maximum of two hours to reduce virtual meeting fatigue. If gathering in person, consider rotating your meeting location among churches if your circle includes members from different congregations.

Schedule and Frequency of Meetings

Sacred Ground circles may begin at any time of year. Because of the volume of material, circles are encouraged to meet every two or three weeks. Meeting monthly is an option, but it may feel too infrequent to maintain momentum.

Some groups have had success combining sessions into a retreat or daylong gathering, particularly at the beginning (Sessions 1–2) or conclusion (Sessions 10–11) of the series.

Balancing meeting times with participants' work and childcare schedules can be challenging. If possible, consider offering two circles at different times to help make participation more accessible.

Facilitators

Ideally, each circle will be guided by two facilitators who share responsibility for shepherding the group. Please read “Facilitating a Sacred Ground Circle” for information about discerning who should facilitate and how facilitators can prepare.

Discerning What Type of Circle to Form

Before assuming this dialogue series should be conducted with an interracial group, congregations are encouraged to thoughtfully consider what type of circle would best support the work of racial healing in their context.

Sacred Ground asks us to face historic and present-day harms and to do deep internal work. For some communities—especially those with White people who are new to the work of racial healing—a circle intentionally designed for White participants, or a White-work circle (WWC), may make the most sense.

When White people are asked to face racial injustice, they may respond with defensiveness or resistance—consciously or unconsciously—particularly when people of color share their experiences candidly or “tell it

like it is.” A WWC relieves people of color from the burden of having to suppress their own emotions while managing the emotions of others. Additionally, WWCs create space for White people to express their experiences and emotions without shame or fear of causing offense. Even when conducting this series with a WWC, the voices and perspectives of people of color are ever-present through the readings and films.

At the same time, we now recommend interracial circles (IRCs), and our [2022 evaluation](#) suggests that they are valuable to both participants of color and White participants. We recommend that White participants in IRCs have some prior anti-racism training or dialogue experience. For IRCs, a multiracial facilitation team is strongly encouraged.

A racially balanced group is ideal for IRCs. It is not recommended that there be just one person of color in a group; however, there have been circles where a person of color has decided to participate with full knowledge of the circle’s composition. If multiple circles are being formed and a small number of people of color wish to participate, we recommend they remain together in a racially balanced group, even if that means other circles are entirely White.

For communities considering forming a circle exclusively for people of color, please note that the curriculum was not originally designed for such circles. However, we welcome feedback from anyone who forms or participates in such a circle, so we may improve the materials for future use.

We encourage careful and intentional discernment regarding the type of circle to form. This invitational video from the Union of Black Episcopalians may be useful during this discernment: ["We Bless You" \(22 min\) – The Episcopal Church](#)

Suggestions for the discernment process:

- Establish clear leadership for the discernment process.
- Treat the process as an opportunity for deep dialogue.
- Hold one-on-one conversations with people of color in the congregation—especially if they are in the minority—to hear their perspectives on the benefits and challenges of different circle types.
- Use anonymous surveys to invite candid feedback from members of the congregation about what type of circle they think would be most beneficial.

Forming Circles across Socioeconomic, Political, Religious, and Generational Differences

We encourage fostering diversity within White-work circles. There are deep divides in White America, including differing opinions about race, racism, and privilege. What do we need to share with each other in order to hear one another and to heal? Whatever your perspectives on race, class, and politics, please do not approach this series with the goal of “converting” the other person, but rather with a commitment to openness, deep listening, and dialogue.

You may decide to form a circle along with another congregation—Episcopal or otherwise—and many churches across the country have found this broadens perspectives and enriches conversations. We encourage you to invite more than the “usual suspects”!

Please also be intentional about seeking generational diversity, as there is much to learn and share across ages and generations.

Above all, remember that a personal invitation is often the most meaningful. Perhaps you have a neighbor who votes differently than you do or goes to a different church, but you might value being in dialogue with that person in this way. A heartfelt invitation to join a circle can go a long way.

We can be so eager to begin that we don't take the time for what may be the hardest and most important work in these divisive times: forming groups that will help us step out of our social and ideological bubbles and into truly transformative long-term work.

Gathering Participants

It may be the case that there are immediately 10 interested participants, or it may take a little more outreach, depending on your context. Here are some recruitment suggestions that have worked for others in the past:

- Create a flyer for bulletin boards, the church email newsletter, and printed worship bulletins. Here is an editable template for your use ([flyer as a PDF and editable PPT](#))
- Several weeks in a row, make an announcement during worship and offer to answer questions after the service.
- Ask the clergy to promote Sacred Ground from the pulpit and in their other communication with the congregation
- If there are past participants within the congregation, enlist their help to promote the program in their networks.
- Consider hosting a “sneak preview” to promote the Sacred Ground Dialogue Series, during which you could share the syllabus, and show some of the short videos.

It might take time for people to feel comfortable entering into this dialogue series. Remain hopeful and don't give up too quickly. The circle could be a real blessing to participants who are called to join either immediately or later on, and a sincere invitation might make the difference.

The wider congregation or community can be invited to engage with those who are taking the Sacred Ground journey. A commissioning or closing service during Sunday worship may be one option, as might a report-out to share learnings from Sacred Ground, with all invited to take part in next steps. What other possibilities can you envision?

Registering

If you've decided to move forward with organizing a Sacred Ground circle, wonderful! One person—often the organizer or facilitator—should [register the circle](#) to gain access to the course materials.

We are grateful for your willingness to organize a Sacred Ground circle. Many blessings on your efforts!