
RECOMMENDED BEST PRACTICES FOR ORGANIZING AND FACILITATING SACRED GROUND CIRCLES

These recommendations derive primarily from the results of 2021 evaluation efforts. They were culled and shaped collaboratively by the teams at Indígena Consulting, the Union of Black Episcopalians and Sacred Ground.

FORMING CIRCLES

a. Logistics

- Circle size recommendation: 8-12 participants, max 12 (including 2 facilitators).
- 59% of survey respondents recommended bi-weekly sessions; 20% recommended weekly; others preferred monthly or every three weeks. There are pros and cons as to whether to meet more or less often—more can help with community-building; monthly allows more time for homework materials to sink in fully.
- Given the still predominant orientation toward meeting online, view videos ahead of time and allocate 90 mins or 2 hrs. max/session. Online sessions can be as highly impactful as in-person, though there is good reason to return to in-person as it provides for opportunities such as breaking bread together.

b. Facilitators

- We recommend having co-facilitators if possible, as opposed to a single facilitator; for Interracial Circles (IRCs), if possible, a multiracial facilitator team is advised.

c. Organizing and recruiting

- We encourage intentional discernment with regard to the following: who hosts and who participates in circles: whether all Episcopal, and if so: just your parish, or several, or deanery-wide, or diocesan-wide; OR mixed denominational/multi-faith. Survey respondents who were in ecumenical circles rated that experience highly.
- Particularly for diocesan-wide organizing, it is recommended to be in conversation with your diocese's commission on dismantling racism (or other such name). Sacred Ground is not intended to replace anti-racism training—they can feed into each other well in both directions.
- Online meetings allow for more geographically dispersed circles.
- Offer an “[interest/preview session](#)” prior to circle launch—this provides a chance to promote the series, share info and inspiration, show some trailers/clips, answer questions, etc.
- As part of discernment, view/share the SG/UBE invitational video, “[We Bless You.](#)”

d. Types of circles vis a vis racial/ethnic composition

- We recommend IRCs more than we did previously as our evaluation research suggests that such circles are valuable to People of Color, not just to White participants. Both People of Color and White survey respondents reported in high numbers that they did not “feel the need to censor [themselves] due to the presence of people of a different race.” We offer the caveat that it is best if White participants in IRCs have some prior anti-racism training/dialogue experience.

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- We recommend very intentional discernment regarding the type of circle to form, i.e., White Work Circle or Interracial Circle. Please take time for this discernment. Suggestions/examples of processes:
 - a. Have clear leadership for discernment
 - b. Treat the process as a chance for deep dialogue
 - c. Hold one-on-one conversations with People of Color in the congregation, especially if they are in the minority, to hear their preferences for and thoughts about the pros and cons of WWCs and IRCs
 - d. Use anonymous surveys to solicit candid thoughts from People of Color and White people about what type of circles they think will be most beneficial
 - e. One-on-ones and surveys have been recommended either prior to inviting people to sign up for circles, or after people have expressed preliminary interest.
 - Racial/ethnic composition of IRCs: We do not recommend having a sole Person of Color in the group. It's not ideal. That being said, there have been circles where a Person of Color has decided to go ahead and be the sole Person of Color.
 - If multiple circles are being formed and a small number of People of Color wish to participate, we recommend they remain together and form a circle that is as close to 50/50 People of Color/White as possible, even if that means other circles are all-White.
 - For those considering forming a circle for People of Color only, please know that the curriculum was not designed for such circles so they are not recommended at this time; but we recommend offerings from the various [Ethnic Ministries](#) desks.

CIRCLE EXPERIENCE

a. Race/ethnicity-related considerations

- In IRCs, People of Color should not be treated by default as the “experts in the room”— giving choice is key. Concomitantly, it is important for White participants to be vocal.
- Affinity groups/caucus time: We recommend that facilitators of IRCs touch base with participants after a few sessions to see if caucus time is desired, for check-in/course correction purposes, for both People of Color and White people.
- If affinity groups are not formed, or in situations where there are only one or two People of Color in a circle, we recommend that the facilitator(s) check in with them at intervals to hear how things are going for them. If there are multiple circles in an area that can be the basis for a POC caucus.
- We also recommend distributing a mid-course short evaluation survey to receive confidential feedback from everyone on their experience thus far, as well as the distribution of a post-circle evaluation form. Ideally, there would also be a pre-course survey. The Sacred Ground team hopes to create sample surveys later this year.
- It is important to make space for participants who are of mixed race, as well as for people who are People of Color but who “present” as White.

b. Supplementary materials

- We recommend that facilitators and/or participants offer optional “current events” supplementary materials to further bring home the reverberations in the present day of the history being studied— particularly later in the curriculum as the focus moves to the present day.
- We commend the Deeper Dive lists for further reading and viewing that are organized session-by-session. They include materials on current events, history, theory, etc.

c. Levels of processing

- Small group ministry: Consistency of circle composition and commitment to attending sessions leads to a deeper, more profound experience of transformational community. We recommend maintaining group size and composition throughout SG offering.
- Given how there can be a cultural default that tilts towards “orderly engagement,” it is important to make space for strong emotions.
- For the facilitator and participant respondents to the evaluation survey, the type of processing that the highest number of people wished for more of was spiritual processing; we thus recommend that facilitators more fully utilize the [religious resources](#) offered and that they (and/or participants) bring additional resources to their circles.
- Welcome silence.

d. Effectiveness of and support for facilitators, and facilitation best practices

- We recommend that facilitators have gone through some form of anti-racism training and facilitation training prior to facilitating. We also celebrate emerging leaders with new gifts—waiting until one feels fully ready can result in never stepping out. It can be advantageous to pair a more experienced facilitator with a newer one.
- If there are several circles organized simultaneously, we recommend that the relevant institution (congregation; deanery; diocese) organize debrief/support meetings for Sacred Ground facilitators.
- There is a national Zoom-based [affinity group](#) for Sacred Ground facilitators of color. We commend that group. It can also be beneficial to form one locally or regionally.
- Dialogue norms & formats: Rely on the touchstone norms that the group establishes. We also encourage deliberate discernment as to what formats work best for your group—for introverts and extroverts, people with disabilities, etc. Some of these norms may include speaking one at a time prior to conversational cross-talk; mutual invitation; using a timer; etc.
- A core best practice for facilitation is to BE beloved community: befriend yourself, your co-facilitator, your circle members—practice the way of love.

e. Next steps

- One organizer indicated that their circle shared reflections with their broader congregation after each session. “I think those brief reflections helped to bring these issues to the congregation in a more personal and compelling way since it arose from someone they knew in the congregation.”
- We have heard positive stories of circles in which participants created their own rituals at the end of the series in order to articulate their deep takeaways, repent, bring closure, etc.
- We recommend that Sacred Ground circles meet to discern and take the next steps after they complete the curriculum. See the new Session 11! It offers suggestions and tools for the process of moving to action—whether as an individual, a circle, a congregation, or more broadly.

These best practices will also be woven into the relevant “Getting Started” documents on the web pages.

