

OCMC – CIRCLE GUIDELINES

History

Strengthening Communities One Mediation at A Time

Welcome to the Ontario Community Mediation Coalition (OCMC)

The Ontario Community Mediation Coalition is a not-for-profit association of community mediation service providers in the Province of Ontario, who hold a common definition of community mediation, agree on a standard of excellence and criteria for membership in the coalition, and support each other in our efforts to build strong communities through peaceful approaches to problem resolution.

Foundational Elements of Circles

It's important to remember that circles are much more than a specific program or occasional tool, they are a way of thinking, of being in relationship, and of being in community. There are many approaches to Circles depending on the circumstances. Beyond that, Circles are as diverse and unique as the people who host, the people who participate, and the reasons that bring them together. There is no one way to facilitate a Circle, however there are some consistent key foundational elements of Circle Keeping or facilitation. These include (but are not limited to):

A focus on relationship, mutual-respect, care, and accountability

An emphasis on listening

A central 'focal' point for the participants

Two circle keepers (the co-facilitators)

A formal opening (including an acknowledgement of the traditional territory)

Setting respect agreements as a group

A meaningful talking piece to help regulate turn-taking when speaking (facilitator must explain why the piece is meaningful and acknowledge that the tradition of talking pieces comes out of Indigenous resistance and resilience following the banning of Peace Pipes. Clarify that this is not an Indigenous talking piece or circle, but we want to name and honour the origins of that)

The autonomy of the participants – participation is voluntary and sharing is self-directed

A formal closing

Necessary Skills and Attributes for Circle Facilitation

The Circle facilitation role is complex and multifaceted. Responding to the diversity of needs within a circle requires a high level of skill alongside a specific set of attributes and experiences. Among other skills and attributes, Circle Facilitators actively strive towards:

Holding space in a welcoming way that makes room for all participant voices and silences.

Comfort sitting in the midst of tension, holding the possibility of shared resolution between participants without imposing that as an expectation.

Maintaining equal value and emphasis on the relational aspect as on the content.

Sensitivity to, and appropriately responsive to, subtle individual and group dynamics.

Being able to interrupt and translate or redirect with care and gentle firmness when a participant breaks the group agreements or begins making character attacks on another participant.

Being able to discern and navigate the needs and expectations of both the participants and oneself.

Being able to rapidly self-soothe.

Being able to invite engagement, diffuse tension, and mitigate power imbalances.

Being able to hold silence while participants are thinking or taking time to respond.

These skills and attributes help create a safe space for participants to listen and be heard. Essentially, a space where everyone has a voice, and every voice is respected. Developing these skills and attributes is a life-long journey, and much learning comes through mentorship and co-facilitation.

Additional Requirements for OCMC Circle Facilitators

In addition to the above knowledge, standards, skills and attributes necessary for Circle facilitators, this document outlines requirements set by the Ontario Community Mediation Coalition (OCMC) for OCMC Circle Facilitators. To qualify for hosting Circles, OCMC Facilitators will:

- Meet the OCMC standards for mediation
- Be recognized by OCMC, and the service they volunteer with, as an experienced mediator
- Complete 21 hours of OCMC recognized Circle Facilitation training (including role play practice) offered by an OCMC member organization, and commit to practicing the standards listed here and expanded upon in training.
- Commit to engage in ongoing training to maintain and strengthen skills. In every 12-month period, Circle Facilitators should attend at least 3 hours of related circle skill development, approved by the OCMC member agency they volunteer for.

- Have sufficient facilitation experience to satisfy the expectations of the Community Organization they are working with.
- Undertake case development either with each individual participant or through case development circles.
- Maintain OCMC standards regarding participants, to ensure that all necessary stakeholders are in the circle, that their participation is voluntary, that they have the capacity to participate, and that they are willing to represent themselves authentically from the heart. In the event that a circle participant represents a larger group, the facilitators must ensure that delegate has approval and authority from the group they represent to enter into a dialogue and/or an agreement on their behalf (a delegate may need to consult with their delegate group and come back to the circle).
- Use the OCMC co-facilitation approach (a lead facilitator and support facilitator).
- Facilitate Circles congruent with the Transformative Mediation process practiced by OCMC member agencies:
 1. Create understanding;
 2. Support dialogue; and
 3. Facilitate strategy development fostering greater connection, and (ideally) stronger relationships.
- Facilitate the group in establishing respect guidelines, maintaining guidelines, managing process, marking time, setting questions...
- Have an understanding of Restorative Justice, Restorative Practices, and Restorative Principles.
- Have at least a basic understanding of anti-oppressive practice and trauma-informed practice.
- Maintain Community Mediation expectations for confidentiality and privacy, duty to report harm, avoiding conflict of interest, neutrality and facilitating without prejudice, in keeping with OCMC standards for Community Mediation and those of the OCMC member agency where volunteers practice Meet any other volunteer requirements of the OCMC member agency where they volunteer or provide service

History of Circles

For thousands of years people around the world have gathered in circles, formally and informally, to share stories, experience, and knowledge. Many cultures have maintained spontaneous, informal circle gatherings, but have lost their more intentional and formal circle practices. This form of pedagogical instruction, story-telling, music-making, community gathering, problem-solving, and justice delivery, continues to be maintained by Indigenous communities around the world, as well as by several traditional faith communities, in particular the Mennonites.

Circles have evolved differently in different geographic and cultural areas across Canada. Groups use formal circles for many different purposes and adapt to the specific context. The circle standards outlined here are distinct from, but respectfully informed by, the ongoing formal circle practices of Indigenous communities living in BC, Yukon, Manitoba, and Ontario, and Canadian Mennonite communities in Ontario and Manitoba.

The adaptation of circles to the criminal justice system developed in the 1970's and 1980's as First Nations and Mennonites worked with local justice officials to build closer ties between the community and the formal justice system. They were seeking more humane forms of justice, greater accountability from offenders, opportunities for those harmed to be more fully heard and healed, and increased well-being in the wider community. They developed these processes to more effectively break cycles of harm and violence. Today, this is called Restorative Justice, and circle practices are central to that, both formally and informally.

The first recognized case of Restorative Justice within the Canadian legal system was in Elmira, Ontario, in 1974. Two young offenders vandalized 22 properties. The assigned probation officer, Mark Yantzi, and a prison support worker, Dave Worth, asked the judge's permission for the two offenders to meet those they had vandalized. As Mennonites, Mark and Dave wondered if reparations could be made. Though the concept was many generations old at this point and a key pillar of many cultures who focus on community healing after crime, this was the first time it had been used in the Canadian correctional system. News of success quickly spread. The Mennonite Central Committee is a global NGO that continues to provide Restorative healing circles and circles of support built on Mennonite beliefs.

In 1988, the Anishinaabeg people of Waanibiigaaw Hollow Water First Nation in Manitoba developed a comprehensive Community Holistic Healing Circle program in consultation with the Esk'etemc First Nation people from Alkali Lake BC. This program used circles and other principles often identified by Settlers as Restorative Justice to support recovery from violence across the whole community. This effort has been extensively documented as an exemplar of integrated Restorative Circle Practices, philosophy, and community healing (see: Canadian National Film Board, 2000; Rupert Ross 1996; and a series of federal reports). In 1991, retired Chief Judge Barry Stuart of the Yukon Territorial Court, in consultation with First Nations there, developed and introduced Sentencing Circles and Peacemaking Circles as a means of sharing the justice process with the community.

The formal Restorative Circle practices that have emerged in Settler Canadian communities over the past 40 years are mostly rooted in the extensive work of the Anishinaabeg Hollow Water and Esk'etemc Akali First Nations alongside retired Judge Murray Sinclair (now Senator), the work of retired Chief Judge Barry Stewart in the Yukon, the work of retired Assistant Crown Attorney Rupert Ross with Anishinaabe people in Northern Ontario, and the Mennonite Central Committee. Kay Pranis, a leader in Peacemaking Circle teaching across North America, first learned about circles from First Nations in the Yukon and specifically acknowledges the Indigenous roots at the foundation of Settler circle practices.

We are deeply grateful for the persistent work of Indigenous and Mennonite communities to maintain and reclaim traditional circle processes, their efforts to invite the wider community into this way of being in relationship, and their willingness to share knowledge widely through documentaries, reports, and books.

To retain the spirit of relationship, mutual-respect, care, and accountability, at the heart of Circle processes, Circle Keepers should strive to stay true to the origins and purposes of hosting Circles. That includes avoiding cultural appropriation by respectfully informing ourselves about, and honouring, the Indigenous and Mennonite roots of current practices in this part of the world.