

The information in this booklet is taken from
Circles of Hope: A Training Manual
available in 1999.

To WomanSpirit and the Spirit who inspires the lives of all
women, with special gratitude to Angela Merici
and her vision for women.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I appreciate the many people in our Circles of Hope family who provided support and service in the creation of this booklet. First of all I wish to thank my associate director of the Imani Center, Sister Mary Jude Jun, OSU, for her daily assistance in keeping me on track and transcribing my scribbling into recognizable words. We could never have completed this project without the knowledge, expertise, and professionalism of Leslie Uljee, Ph.D.; suggestions for structure and style from Kass Dotterweich; and valuable input from Jim Vogt, Jim McGinnis, and Gail Babcock. I owe a special word of gratitude to the Ursuline Sisters and the Daughters of Charity for their financial assistance in the printing and publication of this booklet, to Nancy Margulies for her spirited drawings, and to all our principled partners who walk with us on our journey. Above all I thank the grass-roots women in our Circles whose values, vision, and resilience are the reasons for our hope.

The stories included are those of real people addressing problems of violence in their communities. They are examples of the way that grass-roots people have created solutions for themselves. I hope they will challenge and inspire you to make a difference.

LaDoris Payne-Bell

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	2
Part I: What Is Circles of Hope?	5
Part II: A Guide for Group Leaders	8
Part III: How to Live Circles of Hope — The Family Pledge of Nonviolence	19
Appendix I: Background on Circles of Hope	30
Appendix II: Background on Families Against Violence	32

INTRODUCTION

Violence is a complicated public health, racial, social, cultural, and economic phenomenon that degrades and injures millions of people. Interpersonal violence includes domestic violence, gang violence, child abuse, gender and sexual violence, corporal punishment, racial and ethnic violence, murder, burglary, suicide, etc. Institutional violence includes militarism, terrorism, pollution, police brutality, the death penalty, war and warlike games, racism, economic injustice, and other forms of oppression.

Such violence can and must be addressed by a comprehensive prevention strategy. As peace-makers and peace-seekers, all of us are challenged to look beyond our own issues to develop comprehensive responses to violence.

This booklet is an introduction to a peacemaking process called **CIRCLES OF HOPE**. It is written for peace-seekers and peace-makers. The Circles of Hope process links persons from different perspectives and allows participants:

- ☉ to support one another as they listen (social support),
- ☉ to learn about issues of violence that concern them (education for action),
- ☉ to plan how to prevent and reduce violence in their homes, schools, and communities (organizing for change).

This guide consists of three parts. The first part introduces Circles of Hope and describes its use in community settings. The second part provides strategies and suggestions for those who wish to form Circles of Hope in their own communities. Its emphasis is on the potential organizer and facilitator of a Circle of Hope. The third part explains how the Family Pledge of Nonviolence can be used to create community peace — one family at a time. It offers questions that encourage serious reflection on alternatives to violence.

This booklet was adapted from material created by African American women for African American women. “Circling” is a process used by many peoples and cultures. It is, for example, a particularly important part of Native American life and spirituality. Gathering in

peer-led circles is a way to organize ourselves and address community concerns, regardless of the cultural, racial, or ethnic context. Other groups are free to adapt Circles of Hope to their own cultures and circumstances. The phrase “Circles of Hope” is a trademark of WomanSpirit, Inc. and a business name for seminars.



Hopefully many readers will see possibilities for using the Circles of Hope vision and methodology with individuals and families they are serving. Those who plan to form and lead their own Circles of Hope group will find the accompanying participant’s workbook to be a significant help. It contains reflection sheets for the participant, worksheets that can be used as part of the group activities, and space for journaling. If you do not have a copy of this workbook or need more copies, you can order them through the Families Against Violence Advocacy Network (see order form at back of booklet).

If you are interested in more in-depth background about the roots of the process described in this booklet, an excellent resource is “Training for Transformation, A Handbook for Community Workers,” by Anne Hope and Sally Timmel, available from the Center of Concern, 3700 13th St. NE, Washington, DC 20017, 202-635-2757. This handbook is based on the groundbreaking work done by Paulo Freire in Latin America.

Who May Use Circles of Hope?

The method described in this booklet may be used with a broad range of individuals and families, especially those not reached effectively by today's popular educational methods. Although those working with low-income persons may find this process particularly helpful, countless others will find Circles of Hope an invaluable tool. These may include:

- ☉ social service workers for client groups;
- ☉ family educators for parent groups;
- ☉ coordinators of victim support services for crime victims and their families;
- ☉ coordinators of church outreach ministries;
- ☉ professionals and practitioners working with families in high-risk communities;
- ☉ public health workers serving in violence prevention/reduction education;
- ☉ directors of schools for parent and parent-teacher groups;
- ☉ persons wishing to organize within their own communities.

Circles of Hope can be especially valuable to groups working with issues of peace, development, the environment, and human rights.

PART I: WHAT IS CIRCLES OF HOPE?

*Eliminating violence, one family at a time,
starting with our own.*

– Families Against Violence Advocacy Network

The Circles of Hope process was developed by WomanSpirit, Inc., a group of low to moderate-income African American women working in community groups to build economic self-sufficiency and promote alternatives to violence. The method of community support and conversation groups that inspired our Circles was pioneered by the National Congress of Neighborhood Women (NCNW) and has been used at the international level in United Nations conferences and by affiliated non-governmental organizations. It is a grass-roots method used successfully for over twenty years by urban and rural groups to create supportive networks and to organize groups for education, advocacy, and action.

Circles of Hope is based on the premise that community development begins as individuals and their families discover and claim the power that lies within them. This power enables them to:

- ☉ define themselves and create their own solutions (self-direction);
- ☉ make their own decisions (self-determination);
- ☉ acquire resources for an adequate standard of living (self-sufficiency).

Circles of Hope is only complete when there is a vision for the future and a plan to achieve it. **The vision is simple: stronger, safer families and communities. The overall goal of Circles of Hope is families actively participating in solutions that will produce peace and hope.**

The process provides a way for individuals, families, and neighborhoods to become part of a dynamic movement of peacemaking. Circles of Hope creates alternatives to violence by supporting family life,



rebuilding relationships, and reclaiming communities. Groups can operate successfully in diverse community settings. They may be sponsored by communities of faith, social service agencies, or community organizations. They also may be started by families themselves.

Using Circles of Hope as the vehicle for community building, diverse people can convene to accomplish specific goals and support one another as they study common issues of concern and design and implement a plan of action.

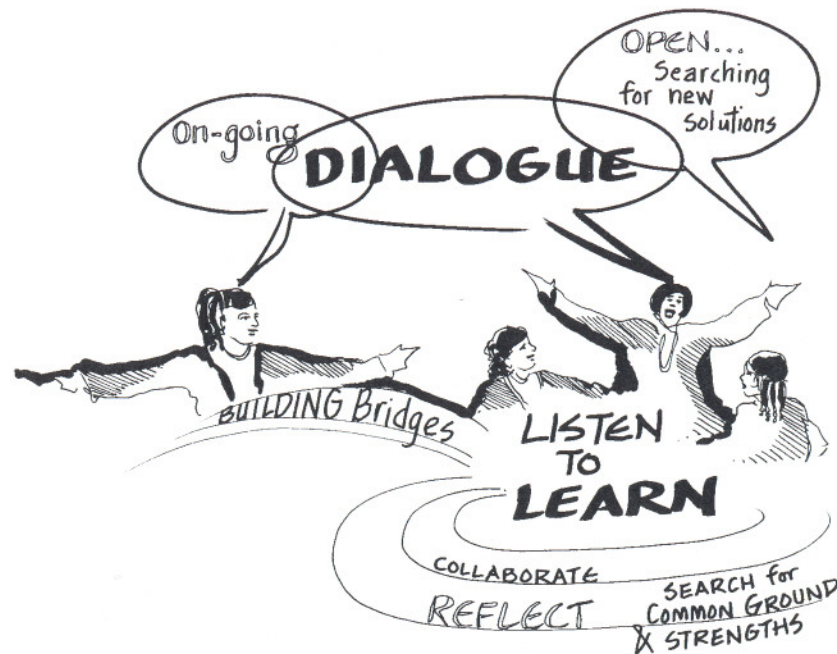
TRANSFORMATION IN TUNICA, MISSISSIPPI: FROM VICTIMS TO PROBLEM SOLVERS

In the middle of cotton fields in northern Mississippi, women gathered to confront the interpersonal and institutional violence of racism. Coming from several communities, they

wanted to form groups that could address gang violence, drugs, lack of economic opportunity, failing educational systems, unresponsive government, and exclusion. They began two years of cross-cultural dialogue with some partners using the Circles of Hope process.

The results have been dramatic. As women began to realize the connection between the violence they were experiencing and other forms of violence, they organized themselves to create solutions. These formerly isolated

women are now a regional network with women from seven towns. They have participated in national meetings of women's groups, testified at statewide hearings, hosted caucuses and retreats, and are currently planning an investment club and a credit union. Those who were formerly regarded as victims are creating their own solutions. As one of their leaders says, "No one empowers another. An individual must recognize and claim one's own power."



The Circles of Hope process is designed to complement existing programs and resources serving families. It provides a flexible, adaptable, and community-based method of communication and problem solving. Because Circles of Hope integrates issues of peace and justice with the lived experiences of those affected by violence, the specific content of each group's agenda is determined by the needs of the families who are members of that particular group. Circles of Hope recognizes that families and communities have different priorities, although they share similar concerns and goals.

Peace-makers (people committed to violence prevention) and **peace-seekers** (people who have experienced violence and are searching for nonviolent alternatives) have often encountered difficulties in communicating with and understanding one another. Too often, for example, the leaders of peace organizations (peace-makers) are middle-class, professional people who may not be as directly affected by the problems of personal and systemic violence they wish to solve. Their perception of both problems and solutions may not match the needs of those they wish to help (peace-seekers). Circles of Hope creates a mutually respectful way of bringing together peace-makers and peace-seekers in partnership. Through dialogue and education, Circles of Hope builds relationships of trust that can effect social change.

PART II: A GUIDE FOR GROUP LEADERS

The circle is the basic form of creation. The seasons and cycles of life are circular. Circular forms...are the fundamental structures of all things.

– Manitonquat (member of the Assonet band of the Wampanoag nation)

When organizing a single group or developing a community-wide program, seriously consider the following critical questions:

Why is this group being formed? What issue of violence does it address?

How will education be accomplished (peer education, lectures, study circles?) and what materials are required?

Who will be the group members, leaders, and partners (supporters who may not be in the group)?

What exercises will be used to help people learn?

When will the group meet? How often? Where? How long will meetings last?

What will it cost and how will expenses be covered?

Make it Easy!

“To facilitate” means “to make things easy.” Circles of Hope provides a process that helps people discuss issues in a productive way. The leader does not need to be an expert, but should be friendly, understanding, and supportive. The leader’s responsibility is to ensure that there is good communication in the group and that all members are committed to the agreed upon decisions. The leader also encourages dialogue leading to critical analysis and creative solutions. So we suggest:

- ☉ Plan meetings with a team and develop a clear agenda.
- ☉ Create a friendly and relaxed atmosphere which includes prayer, meditation and/or music.

- ☉ Utilize the lived experience of group members by telling stories and sharing personal experiences.
- ☉ Include culture and spirituality elements. For example, display visuals that depict strong African American women for African American groups, play reflective music that comes from the Hispanic culture for Hispanic groups, etc.
- ☉ Accept silence; give people time to think and reflect.
- ☉ Don’t play expert; allow the group to decide what they think.
- ☉ Summarize discussions at the end of the meeting. Be careful to include in the summary even the parts with which the leader did not agree.

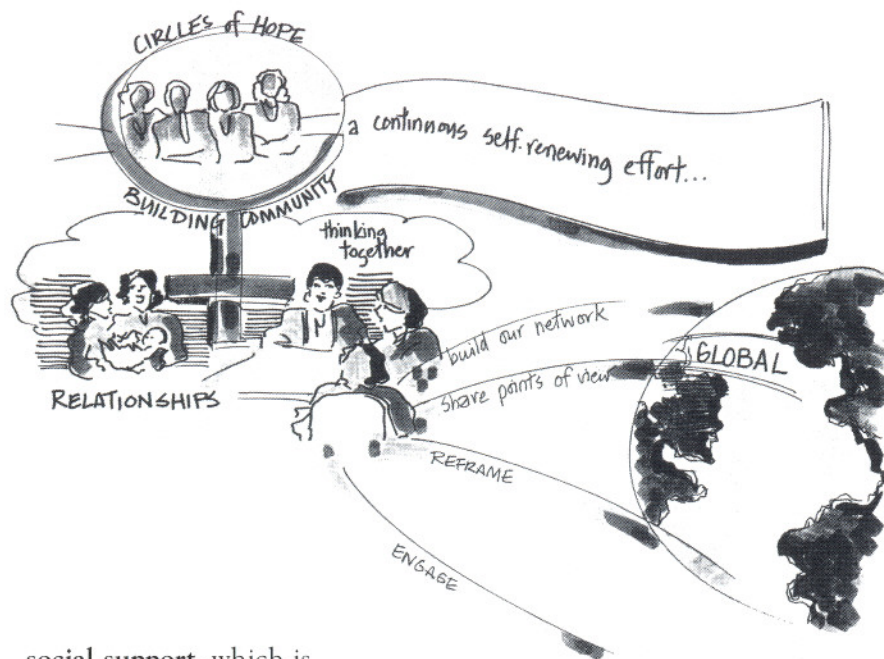
In addition, the leader/facilitator should clearly state ground rules at the beginning of each meeting. These might include:

- ☉ Listen respectfully to everyone. One person speaks at a time and no interruptions.
- ☉ Each person has equal time and opportunity to speak.
- ☉ Use “I” statements. Speak from your own experience.
- ☉ Sharing is voluntary. Everyone has the right not to speak.
- ☉ Respect confidentiality.
- ☉ Put-downs of any kind are unacceptable.

Add your own ground rules if you wish. In general, a meeting should last no more than 1 1/2 to 2 hours.

Leadership in Circles of Hope is not a “leader as expert” approach. This is not a “do for” process but a “do with” or “do together” one. The process must honor everyone’s vision and contribution, and calls on the participants to honor and trust the wisdom of the Circle itself. While one person may convene the group and set the initial direction, everybody in the group must share responsibility. The various roles in the group are shared among the participants, often changing with each meeting. The group as a whole must do the planning.

There are three essential components of Circles of Hope. The first is



social support, which is intended to counteract isolation and provide real emotional support for the participants. The second is **education for action**, because part of support is providing information and education that allow people to become better informed members of the participatory democratic system in our society. People acquire the tools needed to participate. The third component is **organizing for change**. The support and education are not just internalized and taken home but, moved by the unity and solidarity they experience in support groups, participants do personal and public planning. Although the pace of the process is up to the individuals within the groups, eventually there should be some change in their environment. This begins with the creation of their personal plan linked to communal agendas.

Every meeting of a Circle should include time for each of these components. Usually this means dividing the meeting time roughly into thirds (30-40 minutes) so that each component will be included.

In order to ensure that the Circle stays on track and on time, there are three roles that three different Circle members take on at each meeting. These are:

1. **Facilitating** – making sure the discussion stays on track and that the ground rules are respected;

2. **Timekeeping** – making sure that each person really does have equal time and that the discussion moves to the next component of the meeting when it is time;
3. **Recording** – writing down the decisions of the group, especially the decision about the focus of the next meeting.

1. SOCIAL SUPPORT

Support groups provide a healing space.

– Lisel Burns, NCNW

One goal of support groups like Circles of Hope is to create a safe space where people can discuss things that matter to them and know that others are listening. In support groups, people clarify their ideas, establish relationships, and practice community-building skills. Because the Circles of Hope process is easily adapted to different settings, groups are free to choose issues and educational materials that best meet their needs. The group focuses on shared values and provides opportunities to discuss how those values impact issues. The support and information provided in these small groups empower members to take on larger issues and connect with other networks. Thus the Circle is not group therapy nor is it a 12-step program, rather it is social support for those becoming agents of change.

The support process recognizes that every participant is a potential leader who has a need to give voice to his or her concerns. Mutually agreed upon time limitations and the structure of Circles of Hope move participants through personal sharing to common education to group planning. The Circle allows the group to harvest its collective wisdom. Thus the Circle provides the opportunity to share experiences and also to move beyond sharing to analyzing the problem and strategizing for action.

The following guidelines will help the group leader facilitate the social support section of a Circles of Hope meeting:

- Give everyone an equal opportunity to be heard. Time limits and equal sharing are mandatory.

- Focus on the most urgent, self-identified needs of members. The social support section of the meeting differs in this way from the education for action section which has planned topics and materials.
- Direct the group to choose its own questions. Three basic ones that many Circles have found helpful:

SUPPORT + ACTION = A COMMUNITY REBIRTH IN ST. LOUIS

In the inner city community where most of us live, seniors are often casualties of violence. Many seniors living alone have been injured and even killed by burglars. This has resulted in social isolation as many seniors no longer feel free to work in gardens, sit on porches, or take walks. Fixed incomes also limit their access to health care and social outlets.

We found that the women wanted information about leading healthier lives and ways that they could work together to



address the violence in their communities. We created a Circle of Hope called "Wise Women" which meets monthly, makes seniors aware of available resources, and helps them to develop self-care and advocacy skills. Many community partners have joined us,

including a local chiropractic college that provides massage and care; a victims of crime program which offers assistance and information to victims; and a religious community that supports us through funding. In this Circle we have seen victims and potential victims empowered to assist each other and carry violence prevention information back to their churches and neighborhoods.

1. What is going well in our lives?
2. What is difficult or challenging?
3. What support might make a difference?

The questions should be short and open-ended to encourage discussion. There are no right or wrong answers.

While personal sharing is the focus in the first part of each meeting, it is not unusual for personal concerns or experiences to come out during other parts of the meeting. If this occurs, the facilitator needs to be sensitive to the person doing the sharing before moving the group back to the agreed agenda.

Using the Family Pledge of Nonviolence as a focus, the leader may simply bring together a few people who are concerned about violence in the community, discuss specific issues, and plan for action. Or the leader may want to organize Circles of Hope within a group already working on peace-making such as a church, synagogue, mosque, PTA, or YMCA. Group leaders are free to modify the suggestions in this booklet.

Connecting Circles of Hope with local teams from the Families Against Violence Advocacy Network is an excellent organizing strategy. These teams could serve as partners or could find the partners for the Circles. They also could collaborate with the Circles in promoting the Family Pledge of Nonviolence in the broader community.

2. EDUCATION FOR ACTION

This section of the meeting should be planned in advance and educational resources identified, focusing on specific issues of violence that the group has identified as priorities. The resources may include written materials, videos, presentations by speakers, or any form of information sharing the group wishes. The intent of this section is to provide common language and information so that the group can plan appropriate action.

Some of the organizations and resources used for group education around the issue of violence are:

- Institute for Peace and Justice. Request their many alternatives to violence resources connected with FAVAN: the Families Against Violence Advocacy Network. See order

form at back of booklet.

- ☉ Study Circles Resource Center, P.O. Box 203, Pomfret, CT 06258; 860-928-2616; fax: 860-928-3713; e-mail: scrc@neca.com; website: www.cpn.org (especially "Confronting Violence in Our Communities: A Guide for Involving Citizens in Public Dialogue and Problem Solving" and "The Busy Citizen's Discussion Guide: Violence in our Communities").

- ☉ Sojourners, 2401 15th St. NW, Washington, D.C. 20009; 800-714-7474; e-mail: sojourn@ari.net; website: www.sojourners.com (especially "Putting Down Stones — A Faithful Response to Urban Violence," an interactive tool for small groups analyzing violence and examining creative responses; leader's guide available).

- ☉ National Congress of Neighborhood Women, 21 Park Pl., Brooklyn, NY 11217; 888-777-5776; "Neighborhood Women's Training Sourcebook" (information on organizing community groups).

- ☉ WomanSpirit, Inc. at Imani Family Center; see p. 29 for how to contact them.

There are many other good resources available. The group simply needs to be creative in identifying materials appropriate for the group.

3. ORGANIZING FOR CHANGE

The elements of social action planning are vision, planning, and partnerships. The Congress of Neighborhood Women says, "We start with values and vision." In other words, form a vision and release that vision into action. Their steps for organizing for change are:

*Go with the people:
Live with them.
Learn from them.
Love them.
Start with what they know.
Build with what they have.
But of the best leaders,
when the job is done,
the task accomplished,
the people will say,
"We have done this ourselves."
— Lao-Tsu, 700 BC*

- Step 1:** Accept that we are a powerful people and can do anything with faith.
- Step 2:** Make a decision to be part of the solution and not victims of the problems.
- Step 3:** Explore our neighborhoods to decide what is working well and what is not working.
- Step 4:** Recruit neighbors, friends, relatives, elders, youth, men and women who are willing to "walk the talk".
- Step 5:** Decide what issues we want to work on and research them.
- Step 6:** Plan our strategy for power and success.
- Step 7:** Get support and make our intentions known publicly.
- Step 8:** Act. Put our plans to work.
- Step 9:** Evaluate. Look at what went well and where we need to improve.
- Step 10:** Follow through. Monitor any negotiations and victories we've won.
- Step 11:** Celebrate our hard work and success.
- Step 12:** Continue the work, reaching out to our sisters and brothers.

*Failing to plan is
planning to fail.
— Anonymous*

*— From Habiba Soudan, leader,
Women of Many Voices, NCNW
(Used with permission)*

This organizing section of the meeting is used to bring order to visioning and decision making. It focuses on concrete actions, allowing Circles of Hope to develop real options and opportunities and thus maintain the positive spirit of hope and promise. This planning identifies activities and the values that support them, and should focus on community strengths, capacities, and assets. Most importantly, it should foster broad community participation.

Without this kind of planning, groups fall apart or go from issue to issue without realizing any impact on problems they discuss. Good plans help groups decide where, when, and how to take action.



Partnerships with other groups and organizations are often necessary in order to achieve these goals. Forming partnerships is an effective means of establishing an atmosphere of trust, cooperation, and mutual respect in which positive results can be realized. This takes a great deal of time and work but ensures broad community participation.

Partners are those individuals or groups in the broader community (referred to as “peace-makers” earlier) who are genuinely interested in helping those who are the victims of violence, poverty, poor health care, etc. It is critical that partners get involved to be with and work with persons affected by violence as they realize their own potential and power. Partners should never get involved because they think they have the answers to other persons’ problems. Partners can provide the support for change. The support and resources partners provide can range from offering a decent, safe place to meet, to providing money for childcare, to co-sponsoring educational forums, to providing access to the power people and decision makers in the community.

Partners, therefore, must work to help grass-roots people discover their own power, not make them dependent on professional expertise. Partners must walk with the people, sharing their values but allowing the group to make the final decisions.

To understand is to “stand under” which is to “look up to” which is a good way to understand.

– Sister Corita

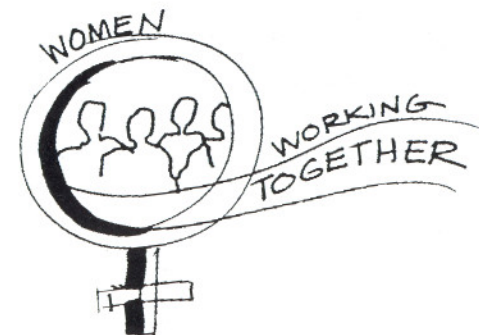
While it is not necessary for every Circle to have a partner group as part of the process, this is usually a very valuable dimension. It increases the probability that significant change will happen and that greater cross-cultural learning will occur. Partners have as much to learn from the grass-roots people as they have to offer. Partners usually gain a

much greater understanding of the root causes of the problem and the implications and impact on those most affected.

A Checklist for Potential Partners

Perhaps an organization you are part of may be interested in partnering with a Circles of Hope group. For example, a suburban church could be linked to an inner city church in a high crime area, or a women’s group could have an outreach program to victims of domestic violence. These are the questions you might ask:

- ⊗ What is your organization’s mission? How is it related to this project?
- ⊗ What situations of violence will you be addressing in your work?
- ⊗ Who are the families with whom you will partner? How well do you understand the culture and needs of these families?
- ⊗ How will the families be involved in assessing their own needs?
- ⊗ How will they take part in planning, implementing, and evaluating your involvement and support?
- ⊗ What resources are available for your work? What are the skills and interests in your group? What resources exist in your community, e.g. space, financial support, staff?
- ⊗ Is it possible for your organization and families to offer the necessary support or do you need to recruit other partners?



The Grass-Roots Revolution

Real community involvement is essential to the Circles of Hope process. Community members most impacted by the problems of violence must actually shape the programs that will benefit them. These plans, policies, and activities must be based on the capacities, skills, and assets of the communities involved. It is unlikely that significant help from outside will be forthcoming to low-income communities in the near future. The hard truth is that communities must be rebuilt from the inside out. Circles of Hope is part of a grass-roots revolution. However, grass-roots efforts need to be supported by the larger community with resources and partnerships. Peace-makers, businesses, educational institutions, religious organizations, and government all have a role in this regenerative process. There is no quick fix, but community groups united around relationships of trust and a core set of values can achieve significant and lasting change.

New social vision must be constructed from local communities themselves.

– Jim Wallis,
Sojourners

SUCCESSFUL CIRCLES

SHARE SOME COMMON GUIDING PRINCIPLES

1. The process is inclusive, community-based, value-centered, and solution-oriented.
2. Human potential is seen as the most valuable community asset.
3. Investments are made in activities which build individual and community capacity.
4. The people most impacted have a meaningful role in planning and implementing initiatives.

PART III: HOW TO LIVE CIRCLES OF HOPE

It is clear that the way to heal society of its violence...and lack of love is to replace the pyramid of domination with the circle of equality and respect.

– Manitonquat

The Family Pledge of Nonviolence, created by the Families Against Violence Advocacy Network (FAVAN), provides a framework that Circles of Hope groups can use in addressing personal, interpersonal, and community violence. The Pledge identifies those areas of everyday life where people discover either the roots of violence or the roots of peace. The Pledge is a concrete way of inviting participants to make a commitment to nonviolence. This commitment could then be supported and developed in the context of the Circles of Hope group.

Practical Guidelines for Living the Pledge of Nonviolence

On pages 25 through 28, the Family Pledge of Nonviolence has been expanded to include reflection questions that help form critical thinking about what each component means. Groups can use this section to form specific goals that lead toward living the values and visions of Circles of Hope. (See the participant's workbook which contains the same material in a format that participants can use easily.) The questions for each component of the Pledge could form the agenda for a number of meetings of a Circle.

The Family Pledge of Nonviolence

Making peace must start within ourselves. Each of us, members of the _____ family, commit ourselves as best we can to become nonviolent and peaceable people.

To Respect Self and Others:

To respect myself, to affirm others, and to avoid uncaring criticism, hateful words, physical attacks, and self-destructive behavior.

To Communicate Better:

To share my feelings honestly, to look for safe ways to express my anger, and to work at solving problems peacefully.

To Listen:

To listen carefully to others, especially those who disagree with me, and to consider the feelings and needs of others rather than insisting on my own way.

To Forgive:

To apologize and make amends when I have hurt another, to forgive others, and to keep from holding grudges.

To Respect Nature:

To treat the environment and all living things, including our pets, with respect and care.

To Play Creatively:

To select entertainment and toys that support our family's values and to avoid entertainment that makes violence look exciting, funny, or acceptable.

To Be Courageous:

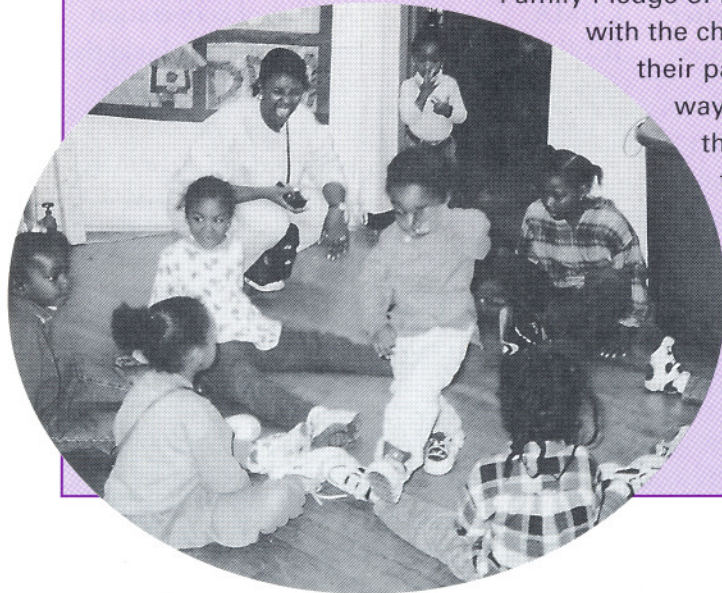
To challenge violence in all its forms whenever I encounter it, whether at home, at work, or in the community, and to stand with others who are treated unfairly.

This is our pledge. These are our goals. We will check ourselves on what we have pledged once a month on _____ for the next twelve months so we can help each other become more peaceable people.

CIRCLES AND THE PLEDGE: GIVING FAMILIES A CHANCE IN ST. LOUIS

One Circles of Hope group noticed many neighborhood children who were unsupervised, often violent in their language, and playing with toy guns that resembled real automatic weapons. The Circle began a "toy gun buy back" program. The members were enthusiastic about working to prevent violence rather than working with victims or perpetrators of violence. Yet they realized that the real problems for these young people were poverty, lack of economic alternatives, a shortage of concerned adults to work with the children, and their families not being connected to family support systems. Their families needed help and support. While the toy gun buy back continues, the Circle is designing a project that will allow the children to work and earn spending money. They are also using the

Family Pledge of Nonviolence with the children and their parents as a way of educating them about the root causes of violence and the implications of violence, even in play.



An Afro-Centric Interpretation of the Pledge

The seven principles of Kwanzaa have provided inspiration for Circles of Hope. The following table integrates the Family Pledge of Nonviolence with this Afro-centric value system, relating the Pledge more closely to African American participants. As stated in the Introduction, Circles of Hope can be useful in a variety of cultural, racial and ethnic settings. Potential leaders should feel free to connect other cultural, racial, or ethnic frameworks like Kwanzaa with Circles and the Pledge.

Respect self and others (Affirming everyone's dignity)	UMOJA (Unity)	Rebuilding sustainable and peaceful communities requires that we become a unified force working for the common good.
Communicate better (Developing partnerships of trust)	UJIMA (Collective work and responsibility: cooperation)	A spirit of cooperation sets the stage to build the relationships required for peace. The full achievement of human rights demands that we all assume responsibility.
Be courageous (Self-determination, challenging violence and racism)	KUJICHAGULIA (Self-determination)	Peace requires us to take charge of our futures and to name peace as our goal.
Listen (To others and the Spirit within)	NIA (Purpose)	Listening encourages us to get in touch with our own inner peace and purpose.

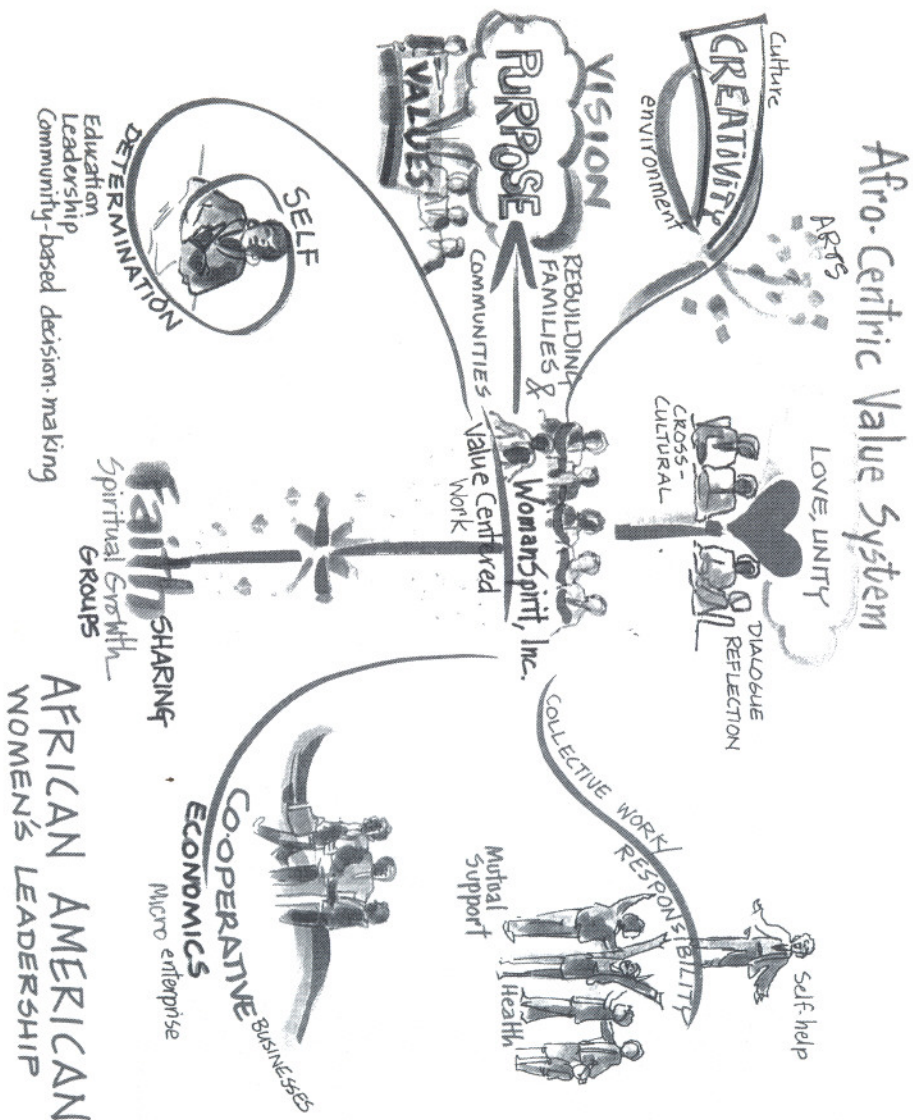
Forgive (Restorative justice - a path to reconciliation)	UJAMAA (Cooperative economics)	World peace requires amnesty, debt forgiveness, and economic alternatives. Without forgiveness there is no common future.
Respect nature (Respecting the Creator by caring for all creation)	IMANI (Faith)	We must be guided and strengthened by our faith to create communities of peace.
Play creatively (Building on strengths, using imagination and talent)	KUUMBA (Creativity)	We must create celebrations of peace for children, parents, and communities.

Earlier this year, my family and I were victims of a violent crime. My son, Richard, and his best friend, my godson, were murdered. I remember thinking, 'You are not the first mother to have experienced this and you are not the last. Violence has just knocked at your door.'

I realize that this was a statement of hopelessness: hopelessness because of the condition of our society; hopelessness because of the thought that life has so little value; hopelessness because of the fact that this is going to happen again to another family.

But today I have hope: hope because I belong to a committed, spirit-filled faith community; hope because I am a member of a peace and justice committee that strives to inform our larger community about the needs, injustices, and conditions of our society; hope because of the families gathered here today to proclaim to God and to you, our faith community, our family pledge to live nonviolence in our interactions with each other and others we encounter in our daily lives."

– Vandetta Farrington



I pledge to respect self and others:

To respect myself, to affirm others, and to avoid uncaring criticism, hateful words, physical attacks, and self-destructive behavior.

An experience I've had when someone truly respected me was _____.

How do others know when I respect them?

What words, phrases, or gestures express respect?

What could I do when I hear or see a person acting disrespectfully toward another?

DECISIONS:

I will respect myself by _____.

I will respect others by _____.

R-E-S-P-E-C-T! Find out what it means to me.

– Aretha Franklin

I pledge to communicate better:

To share my feelings honestly, to look for safe ways to express my anger, and to work at solving problems peacefully.

I get angry when _____.

What do I do when others are angry at me?

How do I usually deal with conflicts? How could I improve?

DECISIONS:

When I am angry I will express my feelings without violence by _____.

I will try to deal with conflicts better by _____.

An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind.

– Gandhi

I pledge to listen:

To listen carefully to others, especially those who disagree with me, and to consider the feelings and needs of others rather than insisting on my own way.

*Listening to one another
is loving one another.*

– African proverb

When is it difficult for me to listen to others?

How do I know when someone is really listening to me?

How do I let others know that I am really listening to them?

DECISION:

I will practice careful and respectful listening by _____.

What
about our
children?



I pledge to forgive:

To apologize and make amends when I have hurt another, to forgive others, and to keep from holding grudges.

A time when apologizing brought me peace was _____.

A time when an act of forgiveness brought me peace was _____.

What keeps me from apologizing or forgiving?

DECISION:

I will seek ways to make amends when I have hurt someone.

I will begin by _____.

*Forgive us our debts as we have forgiven
those who are in debt to us.*

– Matthew 6: 12

I pledge to respect nature:

To treat the environment and all living things, including our pets, with respect and care.

In what ways am I already caring for the earth? In what ways am I being careless about the environment?

How does my belief in respecting nature challenge me to live differently?

How can I get the groups or institutions I'm part of (church, school, civic, work, etc.) to speak out or take action on behalf of the environment?

DECISION:

Three additional steps I will take to care for the earth and prevent pollution are _____.

*Lack of respect for growing, living things soon leads
to lack of respect for humans, too...*

– Chief Luther Standing Bear

I pledge to play creatively:

To select entertainment and toys that support our family's values and to avoid entertainment that makes violence look exciting, funny, or acceptable.

What family and community traditions do I practice that bring me peace, and make me feel connected? How can I add play or celebration to renew and restore myself?

What activities can we do at home to have fun without violence?

How much of my family's time and money are devoted to watching TV and videos? What changes do we want to make in this area?

DECISION:

I will re-create myself, celebrate life, and encourage non-violent play by _____.

Many children seem to use play time to imitate the violence they see on TV and videos rather than to develop creative, imaginative play of their own making.

– Diane Levin (from "Remote Control Childhood")

I pledge to be courageous:

To challenge violence in all its forms whenever I encounter it, whether at home, at school, at work, or in the community, and to stand with others who are treated unfairly.

What forms of violence (media violence; gun violence; violence in homes, neighborhoods, or schools; the violence of poverty; hate violence; or others) upset me the most? Why?

What am I already doing about the violence around me?

In challenging violence, what is so important that it will cause me to give up lunch? To give up a day's pay? To give up my status in the community?

DECISION:

One additional step I will take to challenge violence is _____.

Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak. Courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen.

– Winston Churchill

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

L aDoris Payne-Bell is WomanSpirit's founder and executive director. She is a grass-roots community developer, active in local, national, and international community-based groups. Her experience with group dialogue and problem solving and exposure to the methods used by international organizations to promote peace and economic sustainability led her to develop a similar process for local communities in Missouri and Mississippi: Circles of Hope. Payne-Bell's objective is community development through the appropriate and responsible use of social capital—such as knowledge, skills, and abilities of people and their organizations—and the empowerment of low-income women and their families.

She has participated in a number of United Nations conferences, including the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995 and the Habitat II Conference on Sustainable Development held in Istanbul in 1996. She is a leader in the National Congress of Neighborhood Women and a member of GROOTS (Grass-roots Organizations Operating Together in Sisterhood).

For Circles of Hope seminars, workshops, or additional publications, contact:

Circles of Hope

Imani Family Center

6350 Garesche Avenue

St. Louis, Missouri 63136-3446

Phone: (314) 381-1915; Fax: (314) 383-1678

E-mail: WomanSpirit@aol.com

Never doubt that a small group of committed people can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.

– Margaret Mead

APPENDIX I

(The following interview with LaDoris Payne-Bell, Executive Director of WomanSpirit, Inc., captures the vision, hope, and essence of Circles of Hope.)

Q. What is Circles of Hope?

A. Circles of Hope began as a faith-based group of African American women. Faith and hope are the pillars of our work, so our Center is named “Imani,” which is Swahili for “faith.” Although we have several different kinds of support group — for those wishing to start businesses, health and wellness groups for mid-life to seniors, leadership groups in Northern Mississippi, and a global dialogue group that is cross-cultural — they are all Circles of Hope. Each group has its own name and integrity and chooses its own agenda. Sitting in circles promotes a deep cultural relationship for both women and people of color. This method of organizing is value-centered and comes naturally for women.

Q. What is the Imani Family Center?

A. I began with the original goal of supporting the leadership of grass-roots women. Even though I had been working with low-income African American women for more than twenty years, we had no place to meet except our own small living rooms or church basements when possible. Middle-class or professional women might have workplace spaces that are friendly. They might belong to other groups that control space. But some of the women I was working with were homeless or lived in very crowded conditions and had no space even to gather their thoughts. So Imani Family Center became a place where they could meet in a culturally sensitive setting with people they could trust.

Q. What do you mean by support groups?

A. Our meetings always begin with prayerful support of one another. I did not begin this as an organizing process. The groups came together for self help and mutual help. The people wanted hope. They wanted to make sense of what was going on in their lives and in the world. They wanted to get “un-poor,” to figure out ways to be safe, to be happier. They wanted to share their strengths, to hear from and teach one another. I saw the need to organize.

Q. You mention a specific way you organize the women. Could you explain that in more detail?

A. I had no agenda at all for what the groups would accomplish. I was simply trying to help them function in a way that would take them toward their goals. This process evolved out of our work together. I realized that faith-based groups in Latin America had been organized this way through liberation theology. In visiting Korea, I encountered these cell groups that were part of a massive revival. Millions of people have organized in small groups. Then I met women from India and Africa who had worked in this way. I knew that organizing was preliminary to development.

I heard about the National Congress of Neighborhood Women (NCNW) and went to one of their Community Development Institutes. I thought that some of their organizing principles could be helpful to us and they were. They really did short-cut our organizing process because I stopped working out of my gut and began using the model of other women’s groups. Then I found out that our sisters in other parts of the world had taken the organizing principles that had been developed in the United States and had used them to organize millions of women. There are streams of consciousness that seem to have created this method of organizing that I am using. Some of those streams are peace and justice movements, the environmental movement, and the civil rights movement. A lot of this is straight out of the civil rights movement where many of us have had some experience.

The process, as described in this booklet, includes social support, education for action, and organizing for change.

Q. Tell us about your work with the National Congress of Neighborhood Women.

A. I’m part of the leadership team of NCNW, which is a network of U.S.-based grass-roots women’s groups. NCNW is the North American focal point for GROOTS, which stands for Grass-roots Organizations Operating Together in Sisterhood. As part of GROOTS exchange programs, I have worked with NCNW in Austria, the Netherlands, Germany, China, and Turkey.

Q: What are your greatest hopes for the community regarding the women you work with?

A.: I hope that people will know we exist, that we are here. I hope that they remember concerns of women of color. The women's movement is not all academicians and women who are on upward professional tracks. There are women all over the world who are struggling, and we are part of that struggle. Our values drive us to be together, to struggle together, and to stay together. Out of those values we determine the issues that we must address in order to succeed in our personal lives and be instruments of peace in our communities.

APPENDIX II

Families Against Violence Advocacy Network (FAVAN) and the Family Pledge of Nonviolence

The Families Against Violence Advocacy Network (FAVAN) was launched in March 1996. Fifty representatives of national organizations, most Christian denominations, and other faith traditions gathered in St. Louis at the invitation of the Parenting for Peace and Justice Network of the Institute for Peace and Justice. They committed themselves to work together on a comprehensive campaign to address the violence in North America. Over the next twelve months, what evolved was a five-step effort to break the cycle of violence.

- Step 1** - Formulating a "Pledge of Nonviolence" for families, faith communities, classrooms, and schools.
- Step 2** - Finding ways to support those taking the Pledge by forming family support groups and other circles of peace and by creating resources for faith communities and schools to teach the Pledge.
- Step 3** - Spreading the Pledge. The Pledge is being translated and adapted for use throughout the world and in every major faith tradition, as are the accompanying resources for living the Pledge. The Pledge is being given to health care, day care, and other social service providers; to parent educators and Head Start teachers; and to

many others who interact with children and families.

- Step 4** - Helping local communities organize to address the many different manifestations of violence in their communities. Local FAVAN leaders and teams are bringing together already existing violence prevention groups and projects and inviting families, individuals, and faith communities to join these efforts. They are promoting more peaceful family relationships by getting faith communities to offer more parenting programs.
- Step 5** - Harnessing all these local efforts with national advocacy organizations and campaigns focusing especially on the issues of gun violence, media violence, violence in schools, the violence of poverty, domestic violence, and hate violence.

Our vision includes one million families and ten thousand schools committed to the Pledge by the year 2000, FAVAN teams in hundreds of US cities, a national advocacy effort in the United States involving at least one thousand national organizations as well as tens of thousands of local organizations, and similar efforts in other countries. We have joined the Nobel Peace Laureates in their campaign to make the Year 2000 "The Year of Education for Nonviolence." At the beginning of the new millennium, we want to join with the Laureates in making the years 2000-2010 a "Decade for a Culture of Nonviolence" and launch a "Century of Nonviolence," not just in the US but all over the world.

This is an enormous task. But as we state in the FAVAN Manifesto: "In the face of widespread violence, many people are frightened, confused, frustrated, angry, and, perhaps worst, feeling powerless. We, however, claim both a power and responsibility to respond. We join together in this Advocacy Network to express a moral voice, a voice of outrage, that calls all families and our whole culture to reject violence and violent 'solutions' to problems. We will break the cycle of violence by creating a circle of families who can be strong and bold because we stand together. We say 'NO!' to violence in our homes, and 'YES!' to countering violence and promoting alternatives to violence in our communities and world."

Please join us!