

DISCERNING AND PREPARING TO PARTICIPATE IN A LISTENING CIRCLE

Over the next six to nine months, the Diocese of North Carolina Pastoral Response Team is organizing Listening Circles in preparation for a Listening Liturgy to be held in late spring/early summer of 2020. Our hope is to promote healing, reconciliation and renewal for those who have experienced sexual harassment, exploitation, or assault by those in power in The Episcopal Church as well as strengthen our capacity for healthy intervention and prevention of such misconduct.

Sexual misconduct by clergy is a profound betrayal of trust bestowed by congregants and by the office of ordained ministry. Sexual misconduct in the church also can involve interactions among lay people. By engaging in sacred listening to the accounts of the impact of such abuse, our bishops hope to convey a willingness to be present with and for those who have suffered from such violations, as well as demonstrate their commitment to nurturing and safeguarding right relationships in our diocese. Right relationships form the sturdy foundation upon which beloved community is built.

What can I expect at a Listening Circle?

Each Listening Circle will be convened by the Bishops of the Diocese, and will include 8-16 people. This will include the participants, one or both of the Bishops, one or two members of the PRT, and the Chaplain.

Each Listening Circle will last 1.5 to 2 hours.

Every effort will be made to hold this sacred work in a safe, spacious, private space conducive to significant personal sharing and confidentiality.

The format will be simple. There will be a gathering and introduction, going over guidelines for sharing and the signing of a covenant of confidentiality. There will be a time of centering, ending with prayer by the Chaplain. Then participants will have 5-10 minutes to share their story, with 1-2 minutes of silence between stories. There will be no interruptions, no questions, and no follow up comments. No one is to ever bring up or refer to the events related unless the narrator brings up the matter first. There will be a minute or two of silence between each time of sharing. At the conclusion of the sharing the evening will end with brief prayer.

Members of the PRT and the Chaplain will be available throughout the event and following the event to offer pastoral support as desired.

What are the Guidelines for the Circle?

Confidentiality is assured. It is understood that no reference to the events described or impacts detailed will be shared, discussed either with the participants at the event or outside of the event. The power of the circle is in the sharing, the listening and the praying.

As a participant, you are invited to focus primarily on the impact of the sexual harassment, misconduct or assault rather than the details of what happened. While we want you to be free to share information such as when the event(s) occurred or give a brief overview of what happened to the extent that you feel it gives listeners a context for your situation and its impact, we also caution you to avoid over-sharing details of what occurred so as not to re-traumatize yourself or your listeners. At the same time, we also affirm that there is healing in each person telling their story in the way they feel called to tell their story.

Should the Chaplain, the member of the PRT, or the Bishop feel that someone is in danger of re-traumatizing themselves or others by becoming lost in the details, they will gently check in with the person who is sharing, express their concern and see if the person judges themselves safe to continue. They will redirect the sharing if needed.

The Listening is not the place to make a new allegation of misconduct. These Listening Circles are intended rather for witness, prayer, and healing. Generally, participating in the Listening Circle is not the first time the story has been shared. Names and details that would identify specific persons are not mentioned, and locations are obscured, if possible. Should the desire to raise a new allegation occur as a part of the Listening Circle process, a representative of the Diocese will be present to guide you in the reporting process.

While these Listening Circles are convened specifically for church-related experiences of sexual harassment, exploitation, or assault, experiences outside the church, especially when seen as affecting one's faith and vocation, are not excluded.

How can I prepare to be a part of a Listening Circle?

The Bishops and the Pastoral Response Team invite you to undertake some preparations for sharing at the Listening Circle, focusing specifically on the self-care needed for this to be a healing experience.

We invite you to speak with a therapist or counselor about your intention to speak at this circle.

You may also find it helpful to do some writing in advance. You may want to reflect on the “the how”: how your relationships with self, others, and/or God have been affected; how others responded to you at the time and since. Relatedly, you might consider “the what”: what is it that you most want the Bishops and wider church community to understand or to ‘get’ about the impact of the sexual violence on your life; what action do you want the diocese and its congregations to take to pursue and safe-guard right relationship and sexual/embodied justice among clergy and laity.

Further: here are some considerations to ponder to ensure caring for yourself as you make decisions about sharing your story:

- Do you have an existing circle of support to whom you can turn for spiritual and emotional care as you make decisions about participating in this endeavor and as you go through the preparation for sharing as well as days subsequent to sharing?
- Will one or more of your circle of support accompany you to the Listening Circle, to be present for you before and after the circle?
- Are you in counseling or have you participated in counseling to deal with the trauma of sexual violence?
- Have you previously told your story to anyone? How did that go?
- How do you engage in self-care? Do you have a daily practice of self-care? How might you plan to care for yourself directly after the Listening Circle.
- In telling your story, know that the Listening Circle will be paying prayerful attention to you. However, after you tell your story, there will be silence and then a brief prayer. Neither the bishops nor the other listeners will comment or ask questions. How do you suppose this structure and this particular experience will be for you?

DISCERNING AND PREPARING TO PARTICIPATE IN A LISTENING CIRCLE

P. 3

- Each person will have 5-10 minutes to share. Afterward, you may want to listen to other stories or you may want to step away into some private space we will provide and make the choice to return to the Listening Circle or to leave. Don't hesitate to bring one or more friends with you if you think it will be helpful.
- How capable do you feel about being able to tell your story without being overwhelmed and re-traumatized by it? Can you imagine the Chaplain or a facilitator steering you away from specific details to share more the impact of the event? How do you suppose that will effect you?