

# SACRED GROUND

A FILM-BASED DIALOGUE SERIES ON RACE AND FAITH

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### ORGANIZING A DIALOGUE CIRCLE

Thank you for being interested in organizing a dialogue circle for Sacred Ground. You may be a layperson, priest, deacon, or diocesan staff person. You are probably Episcopalian but if you come from another faith tradition: please feel welcome as well! Any faith-based entity is welcome to organize circles. We are grateful for your vision, your leadership, and your care. Below is some guidance on issues to consider as you get started in forming one or more Sacred Ground dialogue circles in your congregation/organization.

### I. RELATING THIS FORMATION TOOL TO YOUR CONGREGATION'S MINISTRIES

There are multiple ways this resource might relate to your church's current or desired ministries.

- If your church is engaging the Becoming Beloved Community initiative, Sacred Ground is an especially good companion for the following:
  - 1st quadrant – Telling the Truth about Our Churches and Race
  - 2nd quadrant – Proclaiming the Dream of Beloved Community
  - 3rd quadrant – Practicing the Way of Love in the Pattern of Jesus
- Sacred Ground prepares a foundation that strengthens a congregation's capacity to ask: "What is the history of race in this place?" and to name present-day experiences around race and racial injustice. This progression can then pave the way for the 4th quadrant of Becoming Beloved Community – Repairing the Breach in Society and Institutions.
- If you have a racial reconciliation/justice ministry, or a group of people who have completed an anti-racism training like The Episcopal Church's Seeing the Face of God in Each Other, then the Sacred Ground Dialogue Series can build on your existing work. It can offer a white affinity opportunity, deepen the interracial relationships of those already engaged, or it can draw new members into the ministry. It also can be the basis for reaching out to neighboring congregations, whether in the spirit of bridging political or economic divides, or connecting more deeply with a church with a different demographic with which you are sharing the same sanctuary.
- If you are hoping to create a racial reconciliation/justice ministry, then this dialogue series can be the basis for deepening the conversation around and building the desire and commitment for this within your congregation. Perhaps the dialogue series becomes a precursor to undertaking the Seeing the Face of God in Each Other or other anti-racism training. Sacred Ground is not meant to be a substitute for antiracism training.
- If you offer Christian formation programs at your church, this can become one.
- Perhaps this work can be initiated by or in collaboration with a church history/archives committee.
- Finally, you might consider organizing intentionally intergenerational dialogue groups in collaboration with youth ministries.

In all cases, we hope the series will help set the stage for greater community engagement in the tangible work of pursuing racial and economic equity. And wherever your congregation/organization is on its journey, we encourage you to be in conversation with your diocesan antiracism or racial reconciliation committee so that the Sacred Ground Dialogue Series can be woven into larger visions and plans, such as diocesan or church-wide resolutions, and can benefit from the committee's wisdom and experience.

## 2. DETERMINING GROUP SIZE AND WHERE TO MEET

This resource is designed for small groups. The minimum recommended number per circle is four participants, and the maximum recommended is twelve. If you have interest from a larger number of people, then you can form two or more groups. If there are multiple circles formed in your congregation, or across congregations, you may wish to consider whether occasionally to do some of the sessions together.

Depending on the size of the group, facilitators may wish to incorporate the use of breakout groups, such as pairs or groups of three to six, for even more intimate dialogue.

Due to the pandemic, circles needed to meet online on platforms such as Zoom. What at first seemed like a hindrance, has been discovered to be a strong, viable format for deep dialogue. Please know that many hundreds of circles have been successful with an online format, including with the use of breakout groups. Now that in-person is to some degree an option again, be intentional about the format that you hold circles in (online, in-person, or a mix), particularly when considering accessibility. Online meetings can be more accessible for those who find it hard to travel to in-person meetings or are concerned about COVID. And truly long distance circles become possible. In-person meetings can be more accessible for those who struggle with technology.

## 3. DISCERNING WHETHER TO CREATE AN INTERRACIAL CIRCLE, TO FOCUS ON WHITE WORK, OR TO CREATE A HYBRID

Before immediately jumping to the assumption that this dialogue series should be conducted with an interracial group, we would like to ask congregations to carefully consider the value of organizing a group intentionally for white people. Maybe you will conclude that the circle should indeed be interracial, but we invite you to undertake a deliberate discernment process, rather than let initial discomfort with the idea of a circle for "white work" prevail unexamined. Ideally, an interracial group of people from your congregation would engage in this discernment together.

Given the specter of segregation, the idea of constituting groups that are "whites only" can push buttons for people from all backgrounds. This approach initially may seem like a deal breaker as you seek to draw people to sign up for the dialogue series. What follows are some suggestions and frameworks that may prove useful for dialogue circle initiators and potential participants as you consider a group focused on "white work."

So, yes, a common assumption about race dialogue is that it needs to be interracial and not "separate." There are several other reasons people are reticent to intentionally create what is commonly referred to as white "affinity group" space:

1. Many people of color (and white people) fear that when white people gather among themselves, they don't work as hard at facing racial issues;
2. Many white people think they need to learn about racism from people of color and that they don't have their own experience and knowledge to draw upon;
3. Many white people don't think of themselves as "white," but rather as individuals, so they don't feel drawn to intentionally "white" spaces (though many, in fact, live in white spaces);
4. People from all groups can understandably feel that if the problem is that we are divided, we need to be together to sort through things and to do the deep work of reconciliation.

Here are some theories and intentions that help address the valid concerns above, and more:

- With regard to the concerns outlined in #1 and #2: This is not a "comfortable" curriculum – in terms of facing historic and present-day harms and in terms of asking folks to do some deep internal work. And voices of people of color will be ever-present in the series' readings and films.
- At the same time, the series offers loving, spirit-filled frameworks to support the internal emotional journeys that white people often need to go through, whether that is walking through the stages of grief or finding new strength and new vulnerability, and then discovering a voice for partnership in dismantling racism. It may be more appropriate for white people to offer each other support on this journey than to ask people of color to be the face of love, particularly when white people are just beginning this work.
- There is actually a long, painful history of people of color needing to keep white folks "comfortable" to survive. When white people are asked to face racial injustice, they often push back in a host of ways; they often – consciously or unconsciously – resist people of color who are angry or "tell it like it is." Having white affinity group space relieves people of color from the burden of having constantly to squelch their own emotions and needs for the sake of taking care of others' emotions. (There will be a reading from Robin DiAngelo on this concept of "white fragility"). It also allows white people to express their emotions and not suppress them out of shame or a desire to be politically correct.
- Ijeoma Oluo, a woman of color, puts it this way: "White People: I don't want you to understand me better; I want you to understand yourselves. Your survival has never depended on your knowledge of white culture. In fact, it's required your ignorance." It's in the nature of "whiteness" that we can have blinders as to how racism has functioned in American history. Most of us are raised by our schools and families not to see what has and does go on, so we often have more catching up to do. In other areas of human endeavor, we are comfortable with the idea that there are beginning, intermediate, and advanced levels. Please consider where you are in your process of building a foundation of knowledge and skills that will prepare you for the deep interracial healing and partnerships necessary for racial equity to blossom.
- Some may think, "Buying into this series means I must believe (or someone thinks) I'm racist and a bad person. I treat everyone with respect. Only bad racists need to be in a dialogue series designed for whites." We have not created this resource with a good/bad binary as the orientation. The vast majority of white Americans have forsworn intentional racism. The challenge is to look at how good, well-intentioned people still can have unconscious habits of mind and emotion that reproduce bias, can

have systemic advantages in terms of life prospects that others don't have, and can be looking the other way as harms are reproduced.

- If you're a white American who is sympathetic to the idea that various forms of racial inequality are still prevalent, then arguably it is for you to be in dialogue with white Americans who disagree with that, not for people of color to have that primary responsibility. And such efforts are not for the sake of one group of white people self-righteously "schooling" another – there's plenty of listening needed in all directions, along with true collective thinking.

Ultimately, as primary author of this series, I believe I am called as a white woman to speak with fellow white Americans; it's what I'm most qualified to do, and white-white dialogue is what seems to me most urgent at this time in our common life.

Having considered all this, there may be people of color who wish to join a dialogue group with white people who also still feel called to interracial dialogue. You may have a group that has built trust for several years and is eager to engage this material together. You may also find that while other people of color have "interracial dialogue fatigue," you yourself feel called to be present for these exchanges at this time. Or perhaps you are a mixed-race person who is tired of having to "choose" between two parts of your identity, and you wish to engage this series.

We invite people of color and mixed-race people to read through the syllabus and see if it feels compelling to you. While it is not explicitly written to focus on the internal healing needs of people of color, the two "core books" for this series are key to making this series invitational. One core book is Debby Irving's *Waking Up White*, in which a white woman speaks primarily to white people, and the second is Howard Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited*, in which this renowned black theologian speaks primarily to those of all backgrounds who "have their backs up against the wall." Both books can be sources of insight for anybody, but they are especially applicable to a white audience and a people of color audience, respectively, and thus create a spine for the dialogue series that is welcoming to all.

The Becoming Beloved Community staff team and the Ethnic Missioners of The Episcopal Church offer a host of resources for racial justice and reconciliation work. They and the advisors/reviewers of this Study Guide felt that a dialogue series designed primarily for white Episcopalians would be valuable among these resources. On a parallel track, the Office of Black Ministries has a powerful curriculum for Episcopalians of Color. There are other important programs offered by the different Ethnic Ministries offices.

As the team behind the Sacred Ground project, we support dialogue circles of all kinds, as long as there is a deliberate discernment process prior to forming them. We celebrate the diversity of uses that we know will emerge. And we welcome feedback as this takes shape in your community, as there will invariably be new permutations and improvements to the structure and content that participants will bring forward. Some groups may adapt the curriculum into a hybrid: some time spent together as an interracial circle, some time spent apart for affinity groups (please note that this does require strong facilitation skills). Feel free to adapt the series to meet your unique community's call, and please share your fruits, struggles, and questions.

#### 4. ORGANIZING GROUPS WITH OTHER TYPES OF DIVERSITY: SOCIOECONOMIC, POLITICAL, RELIGIOUS, AND GENERATIONAL

Please know that, in keeping with the primary orientation of this curriculum toward white Americans, the idea here is to seek a diversity of white people, if you are indeed organizing a white dialogue circle. In fact, we mostly would not recommend that you pursue racial diversity and socioeconomic diversity and political diversity and denominational diversity and generational diversity. Few of us are ready for that level of advanced interaction.

The pursuit of white diversity is recommended in the same spirit described in the introduction: there are deep and vehement divides in white America at the moment, and one of the key sources of division is conflicting opinions about race, racism, and privilege. What do we need to share with each other, to hear, to heal?

Here are a few considerations if you are inspired to pursue these other forms of diversity:

- If you don't have much political or socioeconomic diversity in your congregation, then consider whether there is another Episcopal church nearby or on the other side of town with different demographics. Or consider whether it makes more sense to reach out to a Catholic church, an evangelical church, or a congregation from another mainline Protestant denomination. Please stretch beyond the usual suspects.
- Outreach could be from one racial reconciliation, adult formation, or church history ministry to another, via one minister reaching out to another minister to test the waters, or really through any kind of lay outreach.
- Whatever your ways of thinking about race and class and politics, please do not lead with an orientation toward wanting to "convert" the other, but with an openness to practicing deep listening and dialogue.
- This series is designed for a Christian context, with scripture and prayer. All are, of course, welcome as long as they are okay with the Christian elements that are woven into the series.
- Be sensitive to scheduling and childcare issues for people of various class backgrounds.
- Please be intentional about seeking generational diversity. Intergenerational dialogue on the issues that this series highlights is a good unto itself, as there is much learning and sharing to do in all directions.
- Know that most helpful of all is a personal invitation. Perhaps you have a neighbor who votes differently than you do and you go to different churches, but you would value being in dialogue with that person along these lines. Reaching out in a heartfelt way to invite people to join a circle can go a long way.

## 5. TAKING TIME ON ALL OF THE ABOVE

Please take time on the formation of dialogue circles:

- We can be in such a hurry to get going that we don't take the time for what may be the hardest and most important piece of work in these politically and inter-group divisive times: to constitute groups that will help us all get out of our bubbles and set us up for truly transformative long-term work.
- Making the decision about whether to have a white dialogue circle or an interracial circle is tender and important and should, thus, be undertaken with care.

- Consider hosting a “sneak preview” event to promote the Sacred Ground Dialogue Series. The “Preview Materials” page on this website provides links to trailers of most of the films in the series. Some of the assigned short videos, which can be found in the syllabus, also lend themselves to such an event.
- On that same webpage, the syllabus of assigned films and readings for the Sacred Ground curriculum is available for people who wish to review it before deciding whether to join a circle.
- It might take time to help people feel comfortable entering into this dialogue series. Stay with hope, and don’t back away too quickly. The circle could be a real blessing to participants who are either immediately or eventually called to join, and your sincere and clear invitation might be necessary to open the door.

## 6. REGISTERING

If you’ve decided to proceed with organizing a dialogue circle, wonderful! We invite you to use the “Register” button below to sign up. Once you have registered, you will be auto-provided with a link and password that will enable you to access the Sacred Ground Study Guide and licensed films and readings. You may share the link and password with dialogue circle participants, but not others. More information on what is and is not allowable is provided in the “Participant Preparation Guide.”

We’re so glad you’ve decided to organize a Sacred Ground circle. Many blessings on your efforts!