

The Healing Circle

Context & Personal Testimony

– Michael Mack

Since his election as pope in March 2013, Pope Francis has presented a remarkable new face to the Catholic church – one grounded in humility and profound listening, with an eye toward the kind of authentic communication that promotes healing. He has continually voiced an outspoken concern for "the least among us" – those vulnerable populations who have suffered neglect and harm.

Included are those harmed by the Church itself. One of Francis' immediate concerns after becoming pope was addressing the clergy sexual abuse crisis. First breaking in 2002, the crisis grew over the next decade to become the church's greatest crisis since the Protestant Reformation 500 years before, profoundly shaking the church, and for many, undermining its moral leadership.

Voice of the Faithful (VOTF) grew out of that crisis. This group of Catholic laity and clergy was formed to devote itself, first and foremost, to supporting the healing of abuse survivors, and more broadly, to offer a healthy response that could bring positive change.

Recently VOTF has employed a new modality for healing that has demonstrated great potential. Called Restorative Justice (RJ), this profoundly personal and structured communication model had already been proven in schools and criminal justice systems for effectively addressing instances of harm. Its application by VOTF toward helping to heal the abuse crisis is an innovative use of a proven method.

The primary tool of the RJ model is the Healing Circle – an intimate communication process that seeks to include the voices from all affected by instances of harm. In the case of the clergy abuse crisis, these would of course include abuse survivors, but also the wider circles that include family members and friends, other parishioners, clergy and church officers, and even offenders themselves.

This initiative has been advanced by Janine Geske (justice of the Wisconsin Supreme Court from 1993-98, Distinguished Professor of Law at Marquette University Law School, and Director of Marquette's Restorative Justice Initiative). The Healing Circle model has also been supported by New York's Cardinal Timothy Dolan (when Archbishop of Milwaukee).

I myself have participated in two RJ Healing Circles as a clergy abuse survivor, and can attest to the depth of its communication, and its potential for personal breakthroughs via deep sharing. It aligns naturally with Pope Francis' own exhortation to bishops at a family synod to "speak fearlessly and listen humbly."

I am collaborating with VOTF to help produce at least one Healing Circle in New York City. It will take place during the theatrical run of my autobiographical solo show *Conversations with My Molester: A Journey of Faith*, a play about my own journey of recovery after abuse. The Healing Circle will be offered off-hours in the same theatrical venue as the play itself.

Both the play and the Healing Circle are timed to Pope Francis' historic arrival to NYC in September 2015.

RESTORATIVE JUSTICE HEALING CIRCLE

Saturday, September 19, 2015

9am to 5pm

(includes break for lunch)

LOCATION

The Bridge Theatre

244 West 54th Street, 12th Floor

Columbus Circle

New York, NY

MORE INFO – HEALING CIRCLE

To learn more about VOTF's Healing Circle, contact

Jayne O'Donnell

Bill Casey

MORE INFO – THE PLAY

To learn more about the show *Conversations with My Molester: A Journey of Faith*, visit www.michaelmacklive.com