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## Let's talk

At the Council Meeting this month we were doing some major *dialoguing*. One person even prayed at the end of the meeting, "Thanks Lord that we can do this!"

We've always hoped we would be characterized as a place where people can say *what they mean and mean what they say* and not get ejected for it. From the very beginning, Circle of Hope was founded on *dialogue*.

An ongoing *conversation in and with Christ* is the essence of Body life. It is something like what Jesus is talking about when he speaks about the Spirit of truth in John 16: "*He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you.*" Doesn't that sort of sound like everyone is engaged in a deep dialogue, spirit to Spirit? That is what we are working out, too.

Jesus is revealing himself and his ways through his Spirit to each of us and all of us. We rely on everyone to reveal what they hear and know to everyone else in the body. This big dialogue with God and others — of prayer, study, mutual encouragement and sharing what we know — is what keeps making us who we are.

### **So what shall we talk about?**

In this first issue of our reformed quarterly journal, we have asked a circle of ten writers to share their thoughts about where we are at in relation to some important areas of our life together. They are going to briefly share their wisdom, share their dream and then ask us a question we need ponder. When we venture our own answers, the dialogue we create will keep us moving on our common journey toward wholeness in Jesus.

## Community

I was listening to NPR talk radio in the car and there was a story about a traveling cast of the rock musical HAIR. They were not only into the musical, they were into the whole early seventies peace/love thing that gave birth to the musical. It wasn't a faux retro thing, it was really meaningful to them. They called themselves a *tribe*.

When not everyone could go on the next gig, the whole tribe had a major issue. If people quit the show, the tribe felt divorced. A friend of a cast member quoted on the radio was worried. He asked, "When are you all going to get over this love shit?"

I'm not sure some of our friends wouldn't like to ask us with Circle of Hope that same thing. We aren't getting over it, we are just getting into it.

The cast of HAIR is finding something valuable in their community of artists. Isn't everyone looking for something like that, these days, and seldom really finding it? I think our community is onto the Source of it all in Jesus. It is a miracle that we have this island of love and commitment in the middle of this alienated town and generation.

But will we end up just being little tribes — even in the middle of Circle of Hope? Amazingly enough, we have young/old differences, this music/that music, married/single, rich/poor, white/persons of color — little tribes are forming. Will we overcome tribalization and be those diverse circles of ten forming a network of multi-whatever churches? Can we love that much? I hope we live with a vision that is beyond "what I feel" or "what I get out of it" and form a circle of hope around Jesus whose love knows no bounds.

So my question is: **What do you think it will take for God to get us to really act out our belief that we can live as citizens of the Kingdom right now?**

## Depth

Spiritual and mental health in a culture full of activity and rather short in assigning value to reflection is a lasting challenge as we stand at the end of the millennium. With advertising becoming more and more sophisticated and better and better and better at catching and keeping our attention, it is increasingly difficult to actually name our authentic needs. With little thought we press a button and our TV screens fill with advice from a variety of talk shows on how to take care of ourselves. Our music weaves more advice on how to live and to love into our world view. The result for many of us is that, we just keep going and seldom engage in the slow and sometimes painful process of assessing the state of our minds and souls. We connect with people around us, or attempt to in a flurry of activities, but we seem to experience repeated moments of despair or anger or flatness depending on our temperaments. We answer those moments with new efforts to fill our calendars or dull our senses. We may complain about our relationships and wonder why these people don't love us as we wish. What we rarely do is ask ourselves what we really want and what God might be trying to tell us through the disguised messengers found in the many occurrences of our daily lives. We've been taught by our culture to look outside of ourselves for hope and for peace. We need to look *inward*. That will take considerable effort and time to learn how.

We are a young group in both chronological age and in time spent together. We haven't mastered this complex skill of combining reflection and activity, prayer and work, yet. At Circle of Hope we are on the journey toward wellness. It is a good group to travel with if you are looking to grow deep. We are encouraged to join cell groups where honest struggles can be shared. Attempting to abolish "polite Christianity" (sometimes known as fake Christianity) is an excellent goal and it's one that Circle people really embrace. It's good to keep working at this. We are warned in sermons to take the time and bear the cost of waiting on the Lord and doing the work of the inward journey. People are available to support in times of crisis and to celebrate in times of joy, but hopefully, not to intrude when solitude is necessary. The corruption of our culture is discussed. But all of that still happens around us. We must each take the work of crowing deeper as people *inside* and wrestle with it personally, in our own interiors, where our own personal demons lurk. That will always be the challenge. No matter what we are together, each person must be given the grace to do this inner work. That is why we set goals for growing deep that take into consideration the outward efforts that help to bring the inward struggle into focus. Together and individually we need to keep going on this inward journey. We need to continue to strive to be a safe place for others and for ourselves to face all that our lives present to us. The danger is really only in stopping, that is, in closing ourselves off from our own experience in order to avoid struggle or doubt or change. If we keep open, God will draw us deeper and deeper into the freedom of His grace, even in a world that is damaged and dangerous. **What is going on in your soul today? What is the message from the deeper, reflective parts of you?**

Gwen White

## Worship

There are many issues in the body of Christ that burn into fires of eternal debate. One, especially, is how we worship. Circle of Hope is trying to be a "safe place" for people to come and experience Christ, maybe even for the first time. We try to accomplish this at our worship times by four major phases.

I see the first two as the “message” and “about of life together” times, usually provided by Rod [our pastor]. These are times to see what’s up with the Circle community and to learn about the gospel. Combined into one are times before and after the worship times when we can greet friends of old and also meet new ones. Last is the time of music, where we all get together and worship God through song, etc.

There are currently two bands that lead us in song. They put forth a sincere effort to usher us into the presence of the Holy Spirit and to get everyone involved. Since worship is such a personal experience with God, it is really up to the individual to decide how involved they want to get. Often the issue of the style is brought up and blown way out of proportion. God can use any style of music, since it all comes from Him.

The definition of worship in the back of my Bible is “*to honor; to show reverence for.*” If a certain style of music inhibits you from revering God, then maybe the music isn’t the problem. I would love to see the Church come together to honor the God that gave us music in all its forms, all in one accord. I long for the day that everybody comes on Sunday night without a personal agenda and just wants to experience whatever God has in store for them. It would be great if people got past the self-consciousness and fear and would just shout to the Lord, or at least sing.

Whoever is called to lead worship at Circle of Hope is a person who should not only be followed, but should be encouraged so that God can use them even more greatly. **Should we as a church really question our worship leaders’ styles, preferences, or abilities? Or should we look past that and try to let the Holy Spirit do what He came to do by just praising God for who He is instead of who our leaders are?**

*Joshua Szczesniak*

## Showing God’s Love in Practical Ways

We’re STARTING SMALL WITH A BIG VISION FOR HOPE.

Hope is perhaps the one thing in greatest demand throughout the world. Rich and poor alike are in search of something which will stabilize their lives and give them a sense of purpose in the world. We live in a city where hope is in low supply for many. We formed Circle Venture last April to show God’s love in practical ways. By providing jobs and training for unemployed persons we know that the hope of Jesus can be extended in such a way that we can make a difference, and draw people in to the body of Christ.

The primary way we are expressing this practical love is through *Worldly Goods: Imports From Around The World*. This is the first business started by Circle Venture which specializes in handcrafted products for jobs and justice. Our retail store at 264 S. 10th Street carries a collection of unique handcrafted products from artisans all over the world seeking to make a living wage. Circle Venture is also planning on Worldly Goods being a training site for welfare recipients facing expulsion from state support. In this way we can provide work experience for careers in retail. Also, when Worldly Goods is close to full funding this year, we can provide at least 1 full time and 1 part time job for unemployed persons in Philadelphia.

This is a big vision for a small (but growing!) group of people. However, we believe the Kingdom of God is indeed like a mustard seed. It starts off small and grows to be the plant in the field. In 1999 we will begin planning for the next millennium, in which we will begin a second business in partnership with the next Circle of Hope congregation.

Our faith is in God to be a place of hope for the world. For those seeking economic stability, Circle Venture and its daughter businesses will be a place where roads to financial interdependence can be found. Notice I did not say independence. We want Circle Venture to be part of the Circle of Hope community of Jesus followers where everyone shares what they have and no one is in need. No one makes it alone in this world, especially financially. Circle Venture will facilitate social and economic change by helping to continually form the Circle of

Hope community where money and resources are shared so everyone can live comfortably and simply.

Now the challenge for the team God has formed at Circle of Hope is to make a primary commitment to God and the body of Christ in order to realize this vision. **What skills, practical assistance, resources and prayers can you share to this end?**

*Chris Petersen*

## The Arts

The body of Circle of Hope includes many individuals involved with art on both an amateur and professional level; several other individuals attend colleges for art related majors. There are writers, poets, painters, photographers, sculptors, filmmakers, singers, and musicians of all kinds. An important future for the Church as a whole relies on the inclusion of the often neglected and overlooked creative community, individuals who may be less charismatic and outspoken and more introverted, but who also have incredible depth, insight, and experience to add to the body.

1998 was a significant year for art at Circle of Hope. September's Art Opening was a groundbreaking event, gathering together Circle's many artists. The fact that any church would go so far as to openly invite artists and put their work on display is truly remarkable. The additional efforts of the semi-regular coffeehouse events attempted to bring various types of music into Circle of Hope. Occasional experiments in louder genres left some unsolvable problems with the neighbors, problems which brought the events mostly to an end. In its heyday, however, the coffeehouse hosted a wide variety of acoustic and electric musicians, including Circle's own The Squiers. Many different individuals were in attendance, many not a part of the Church and several non-believers impressed with the efforts of Circle of Hope.

For 1999, the question for us all is: How will we better integrate the arts into Circle of Hope and communicate openly with the artists both within our midst and outside of our doors? That is an effort that requires participation from both artists and non-artists within the Body.

*Scott Hatch*

## Reaching This Generation

Last week I walked out of my apartment and got into my car. I drove down the street and passed Jeff, a homeless man of about 60 who hangs out at the gas station trying to get enough money for a hot dog and cup of coffee before returning to the shelter 15 blocks away.

Next I drove through Kensington and noticed a new mural that had been painted since the last time I'd been there. The mural was of a young Puerto Rican man that was shot in a drive by shooting. It was his memorial.

Next, I went into a gas station to get some gas. While I was waiting in line to pay, I glanced at the newspaper rack and broke down in tears. There was a picture of a friend of mine who had shot himself the day before on the front page. The newspaper rack was full of his death. I knew before going into the cashier that he was on the front page. What I learned at the counter was that he was the front page, the big news. I left without getting the gas.

As I got back to my car I realized that I was not crying just because I lost another friend to something as meaningless as suicide but because all of these images: homeless acquaintance, murdered stranger, desperate friend, all came together in a common thread. That common thread is that the "generation" in which they lived was the same for each one. It is the same generation that you and I share — whether young, old or somewhere in between.

Too often we think of our generation as our age category. Circle of Hope may target "younger people" of the "next generation," but those aren't all the people sharing this space in time. This generation can't be narrowed down to "us." We are all in the same boat, and some days it looks accurately sinking. We are all living in an age that has more options, choices and

distractions than ever. Few, if any, of these offer hope and a reason to live. They may seem to offer something for a time, but the hope is false and any excitement or security tends to fizzle.

As Christians we have the privilege of offering true hope and true meaning by offering Jesus Christ. This offering cuts through all barriers of this generation — it can be passed from a 16 to a 60 year old, from a black to a white, from straight to gay and from homed to homeless. **How are you reaching *all* of the ages of this generation, and not undercutting your own, as well?** I pray that you can answer by saying that you offer Christ, the hope that can not be taken away.

*Genny O'Donnell*

## Reaching the Next Generation

I Timothy 4:11-5:2

During our lifetimes, the Church has been geared towards middle class adults and it has failed to reach and keep the young people. Seeing that as a problem, Circle of Hope is on a mission to incorporate the whole body of Christ in a safe community. This is ideal for discipling the next generation in a world of broken families. We have only begun to reach the next generation through past high school cell attempts. However, Circle right now has very few “youth” (people ages 12-18).

Circle of Hope is considered by some to be radical compared to the American church, with its forms of worship. Even so, it has not reached the next generation. We have done a good job with empowering and nurturing “generation X.” Now that “generation X” has entered into their 20's and 30's, we need to broaden our efforts to reach a new youth culture.

I believe that Circle of Hope has been called by God to make our own cultural sacrifices for the next generation. God is in their culture as well as ours, so we need to embrace their unique expression without pressuring them into our newly formed tradition. I would like to see us stepping out of our comfort zone in music and other forms of worship to make room and welcome the next generation. This will give them the freedom to become Cell leaders, form worship bands, and unite the body of Christ. After all, young people are the leaders of today, not the church of tomorrow.

To sum it all up in the words of Pete Greig from Revelation Church UK, “Each culture must be free to find and worship God in the full richness of its own tongue... .There has been a great exodus of the called and the gifted leaving two-dimensional, bland, non-risk-takers, trying to be radical without upsetting anyone!...We need to stop doing youth work and start building church amongst young people.”

**Are we, Circle of Hope, prepared to leave our comfort zone for the next generation and their culture?**

*Erin Ealy*  
*(With input from her loved ones.)*

## A Safe Place

At Council on January 5, we addressed the precise question that Rod asked me to discuss: how we are accomplishing our mission of being “a safe place to experience, share, and express God’s love”. As we determined at Council, it is vital that we distinguish between the nuances of “safe” and “comfortable”. We acknowledged that none of us really, if we think about it, want Circle to become comfortable. That implies stagnation and complacency. But sometimes it is hard to tell the difference between the two. For we do want to create a space with our relationships, music, food, words, and actions—that is, with all that we are—where people can know that they are truly and deeply loved. We know the love of our creator God through the hands that feed us and hold us, the mouths that speak to us truthfully, and the Spirit—led hearts that challenge and love us. We talked at great length, at Council, about whether people are

made “safe” by the externals of our Sunday night worship service. We talked a little about the interaction that should happen before and after worship, particularly with newcomers to our circle. We are growing in numbers, and relationships are deepening, so we seem to be growing in our mission to some degree. It was a good and worthy discussion.

But we did not talk as much about safety within the cells, within our neighborhood and society, or the most basic safety of all: are we a refuge for the battered of this world? If we are not a haven, if the community of our bodies is not a “safe place” for people broken by injustice, by violence, by racism, sexism, and loneliness, then where, literally on this earth, can they find it? Looking around at a Love Feast or worship time, it is hard not to see that we are still predominantly upper class, privileged, educated. We take a lot for granted. I fear for us, if we become comfortable with our privilege.

To make our circle Christ’s place means that we have to sacrifice any safety which comes at another’s expense. So maybe “safe” is the wrong word. Maybe, as C.S. Lewis says, it isn’t safe at all. Just good. We are going to have to reckon with the evil root of injustice in our country, and that is not “safe”.

Oh, Circle—at Council I looked around and could have wept, for the thing God is creating out of us is so beautiful—it is a warming light in the darkness; it is dancing, springing water in the desert. You and I, we are people made new—we are freed to be human, opened up to all the glorious possibility of being made in God’s image. We are free even to wrestle with the most powerful and deep-rooted of evils, for we need not be ashamed to die trying! The safe place we are talking about is nothing less than Jesus’ kingdom, and God is pleased, with divine humour, to create it within our circle. How do we learn to listen to what we may not want to hear?

*Anna Kunnecke-VanBeers*

## Reaching the Next Next Generation

1) Where are we right now?

We are friendly to children and beginning to think about what it means to serve them while we also serve the adults in the congregation. We have several people, single and married, who don’t have children but enjoy them and want to be a part of their discipleship and growth. However, we haven’t come to any type of consensus regarding what we believe about the role(s) children play in a cell church and more specifically in our church. There is disagreement and frustration for some who want to see children more involved and feel a lack of real direction.

2) Where I’d like to see us end up this year.

I’d like to see us come to some initial consensus regarding a philosophy of children in the church that includes what it means to work alongside the Holy Spirit in their lives, that is, what it means to teach them without indoctrinating them and how we can enable them to serve and be involved in congregational and community life in developmentally appropriate ways. Secondly, I’d like to see a safe, warm, clean space for them in our worship space.

**3) Question - What does Jesus teach us about the role(s) children can/should have in our community?**

*Deb Valentine*

## Discipleship

In our current Ministry Plan, we talk about who we are and what we care about. In this long list we make several statements that apply directly to the idea of discipleship. One

statement is that, "the world needs more people deeply related to Christ." Romans 12:1 & 2 says it this way:

"Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God - this is your spiritual act of worship.

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is - his good, pleasing and perfect will."

Gender insensitivity aside, I think this text lays an important foundational piece in the circle we are building. To be urged to offer our bodies to God, everything that we are, is a daunting task. God desires that all we do, day in and day out, be used in service to the Kingdom. In a big picture way, that is what Circle of Hope is about - service to the Kingdom of God.

What is most interesting to me about this passage is the second line. The implication is that we are conformed to the world now and we need to be different from that. We need to be transformed, and this transformation, according to the passage, will come by the renewing of our minds. Paul isn't using fluffy, personalistic, spiritual language here but a concrete statement about the hard work of being faithful. Central to testing and doing God's will is working to transform what we know and think. God's will must be discerned and learned. That is what discipleship is all about.

At Circle of Hope, the primary place we do this discerning and learning is in cells. We gather together to discern by talking to each other about who we are and where we come from and what all of that has to do with where we are going. Overall, we are pretty good at talking and listening to one another. We first talk and listen to one another so we can discern what the Spirit is saying to us. Then we must learn. We must do the hard work of thinking through what a faithful response would be to the directions we are hearing. I am not speaking of intellectualism for its own sake but the use of our God-given intellect to apply our faith to the problems of our world. Martin Luther said we must study with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. That process takes serious work. We need to know the Bible and we need to know the world. Both are necessary if we are to grow into faithfulness.

The questions for Circle of Hope in relation to discipleship is two-fold as I see it. **First, how are we seeking to learn about our faith and grow in it? The second is related to the first. Who are we investing in to help them grow?** If we are to know God's will we must transform our minds and help others to do the same.

*David Bestwick-Satterlee*