



Circles of Change

Transforming the Way
We Do Change

The People of Spirit in Action

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Spirit in Action's Mission Statement

Spirit in Action supports, sustains, and connects those who are passionate about justice, love, equality, creativity, and sustainability to work collectively for deep and lasting social change and for the protection of the planet. Through our programs, Circles of Change and the Progressive Communicators Network, we provide tools, training, and networking opportunities for: weaving a heart and spirit perspective into change work; creating positive vision; healing divisions of social identity, competition, and issue focus; and taking action that integrates individual, group, and systems change.

Welcome!

We welcome you into this report and into Spirit in Action's work to uncover as well as recover approaches and tools for fostering lasting social and political transformation. Spirit in Action and our Circles of Change Program began as a response to political activists' desires and needs for a more united, collaborative, visionary, and strategic movement for progressive change in the United States.

Through Circles of Change, multiracial, multigenerational, and mixed-class groups of people are convening across the country to explore ways to meet these desires and needs. In this report, we present their wisdom and insights into how to build a movement for social and political change that brings spirit and a heart-centered approach into the work for social justice, supports expression of what we are working toward rather than what we are working against, heals divisions between people and groups, and supports collaborative, sustainable action. Although they may not name themselves in this way, these Circle participants and facilitators are the thinkers and theorists of a new articulation of the work of social and political change. Their collective wisdom grows from the power of being firmly grounded in action and reflection. They are actively living the change that they wish to see take place in the world.

In the pages that follow, you will find:

1. Detailed definitions of what has become the four foundational elements of Circles work: Spirit, Vision, Healing Divisions, and Action.
2. An overview of the impact of the Circles approach and curriculum on the participants and the wider work for building a movement for change. This section is rich with the stories and details of Circle participants' experiences.
3. An outline of new questions for future Circles to explore and proposed organizational directions for Spirit in Action to take.

While this report is firmly grounded in methods of qualitative and participatory evaluation, we worked to make it readable and lively. The voices of the participants ring throughout. The details of our methods are contained in the last section. References and sources are included at the end of the report.

As we reviewed the finished report we were struck by:

- How Circle participants are re-envisioning, redefining, and expanding what it means to be an activist for social and political change.
- How Circles demonstrate that diverse groups can work together to move forward with the work of change.
- How much the building of community that came from sharing meals, stories, and diverse spirit perspectives is a foundational piece of Circles' success.
- How breaking down the isolation of those who seek different ways to create change allows creative perspectives and ideas to emerge.

We invite you to engage your reflective capacities while you read the report, too. We've anchored this reflection in Reader Reflection questions, such as the one below, which appear within bars throughout the report. We invite you to write to us at info@spiritinaction.net and visit our web site at www.spiritinaction.net to find out more ways you can engage with, and contribute to, the Circle community and its work.

There are so many people to thank in large collective projects such as this report. We would especially like to thank the Circle participants and facilitators who answered our many questions and offered great wisdom and ideas, as well as all those who aided in our data gathering and the production of this report. You can find the names of these generous and wise individuals on the back inside cover. We are fortunate to have had individual and foundation funders who took a risk on a new program and helped Circles of Change grow. We, who have worked on this project, are especially grateful to the Ford Foundation for underwriting our work and the production of this report.

In Peace and Power,

Pamela Freeman

Karen Hutchinson

Scherazade Duruwalla King

Natalie Reteneller

Carolyn Cushing

Linda Stout



*Pamela, Karen,
Natalie, Scherazade,
and Carolyn (in front)*

READER REFLECTION

WHAT DRAWS YOU TO EXPLORE THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN SPIRIT, VISION, COMMUNITY, AND ACTION FOR SOCIAL AND POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION?

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Introduction



“We will have many visions of what a just and equitable democracy will look like, and we have even more ideas on how to get there. But we must begin to work together, to compromise, and to listen to each other in order to realize our visions. Working together will be the hardest challenge we will face—much harder than facing the opposition or working alone. But it is the only way we will win.”

—Linda Stout, Spirit in Action Founder and Director

What Is Spirit in Action's Circles of Change Program? Spirit in Action exists to foster collective action by those who are passionate about justice, equality, peace, and planetary sustainability and identifies this work as movement building.

Central to Spirit in Action's views on movement-building work are two broad aims: 1) the creation of an infrastructure of organizations, networks, and leaders sharing common values and visions, and 2) encouraging the belief, among both activists and the general public, that deep and lasting change that orients society and its institutions toward our highest values is possible. Spirit in Action's Circles of Change Program, which convenes small groups in communities across the country, is an important vehicle for finding and practicing approaches for building a diverse and broad-based movement for change.

Founded in November 1999 by longtime grassroots organizer Linda Stout, Spirit in Action came into being as a response to the call of political activists to think strategically and creatively about the current health and effectiveness of the progressive movement. A number of studies and assessments of the progressive movement and its impact have been conducted, including Peace Development Fund's (PDF) 1999 Listening Project with social justice activists, Harvard University's Hauser Center for Nonprofit Organizations' 1999 convening of nonprofit practitioners, and the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy's examination of the right's funding strategies.¹ Guided by these studies and her own decades of experience in the grassroots movement for social justice, Linda Stout identified four critical needs for the progressive movement stepping into the twenty-first century:

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1. A clear and positive message to convey the movement's values and work to a broader audience.

In PDF's Listening Project, the comments of participants could be summarized as, "Social change advocates are always talking about what we are against rather than what we are for." Fear of an "enemy" is often used to try to mobilize action in social justice organizations. Fear and opposition have not proven to be effective tools for sustaining a movement over time and increasing its membership.

2. A connection to heart, community, culture, and spirit. The Listening Project's summary of recommendations for strengthening the progressive movement included attention to "a cultural and spiritual component (that) nurtures and strengthens us in the struggle." Many of the Hauser Center participants "talked about staying with their work because they are 'idealistic,' because the 'work is directly tied to spirituality' and to 'conversations with God.'" While activists may share these beliefs in small ways, the day-to-day demands of their work often drown out these quieter inspirations. The result is that many activists are denied a tool critical to sustaining them through the challenges of their work.

3. New ways of working that repair fragmentation and create connections. Although grassroots activists share similar visions and values, there are a number of issues that fragment the movement and inhibit effective work. As noted by Listening Project participants, many groups are devoted to working on single issues in their community, and activists do not feel they have the time or resources to make connections across issues or geography. Participants in both the Listening Project and Hauser Center studies spoke strongly about how the continued existence of oppression (racism, classism, and homophobia, for example) in the larger society, and in the social justice movement itself, creates divisions, weakens organizations, and deprives the movement of critical people talent. Finally, many activists talked about how turf issues and competition for funding create divisions.

4. Time and support for doing visionary and “big picture” thinking. Both Listening Project and Hauser participants talked about taking time to reflect on longer-term issues and to develop visions for the futures of their organizations and the movement. They valued their participation in these studies because it gave them that time for reflection. As a result of these studies, as well as the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy’s report on the right’s funding of think tank organizations, activists in grassroots groups debated the need for their own think tanks and other research projects. While people supported the need for such vehicles, they also sought to have this work grounded in grassroots reality rather than controlled by a specific intellectual or academic center. Activists offered ideas for floating “think tanks” or periodic conversations.

Spirit in Action proposed that meeting these needs is critical to revitalizing the progressive movement at this time. The Circles of Change Program fosters the development of small groups of diverse activists and concerned individuals in communities across the country to experiment with existing tools and approaches, and to develop new strategies to meet these needs. The Circles were formed to function as the suggested grassroots floating think tanks. During 2001 and 2002, the time period covered by this report, 160 people from different backgrounds of race, spiritual practice, and political work participated in the Circles Program in six areas of the country. Trained, paid facilitators, often working in multiracial teams, served as Circle leaders and guided groups of 6–15 participants through a set curriculum developed by Spirit in Action staff and Circle of Change facilitators. In the 2001 pilot session, Circles consisted of six sessions and in 2002 the curriculum was expanded to 13 sessions. A number of these Circles continued after the end of official sessions and new Circles were formed in 2003 and 2004; some examples and details about these newest Circles are included in the Impacts section of this report.

Facilitators used a range of activities designed to engage the whole person, including discussion, experiential exercises, contemplation, ritual, play, art, and community meals. The facilitator played a critical communication



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role by reporting questions, insights, and successes of each Circle session. As Circles came to a close, facilitators and staff worked with members to decide whether to continue or conclude their Circle experience. The work of Circles is described in greater detail in the Spirals of Learning: The Circles of Change Program section of this report.

Why Did We Do a Participatory Evaluation and Prepare a Report?

Following the 2002 round of Circles, Spirit in Action staff realized that a period of reflection on, and articulation of, what had been learned to date was needed more than rapid organizing of new Circles. They recognized that the Circles model needed strengthening and that the spirit-centered approach to political change work needed further definition to be seen as credible. In early 2003 the organization began a two-year process to:

- Identify the strengths of, and gaps in, the Circles of Change model as well as investigate the impact Circles have on participants in particular and movement building in general;
- Contribute to an emerging field of social transformation work that integrates spirit and action;
- Offer a clearer picture to social change activists of how this approach to change work can impact and benefit their work.

A committee of Circle of Change facilitators and Spirit in Action staff used tools of participatory evaluation and research to investigate these objectives. Using a participatory approach for the evaluation was a logical extension of the participatory, group-driven dialogue of the Circles. The following aims of participatory evaluation are consistent with the values of Circles:

Participatory evaluation focuses on learning, success, and action. Participatory evaluation asks what was learned—what worked, and what did not work. Beyond this, participants are given an opportunity to reflect on how these findings may be translated to action and program improvement. The people and groups most directly involved decide what determines success.

Recognition of the progression of change—knowledge, attitudes, skills, behavior, and community action—is built into the evaluation. Rather than beginning with pre-existing standards or definitions, participatory evaluation builds from the opinions, ideas, and feelings of participants. Through this ground-up approach to knowledge development, participatory evaluation measures individual changes in beliefs, attitudes, skills, behavior, and capacity to promote positive change.

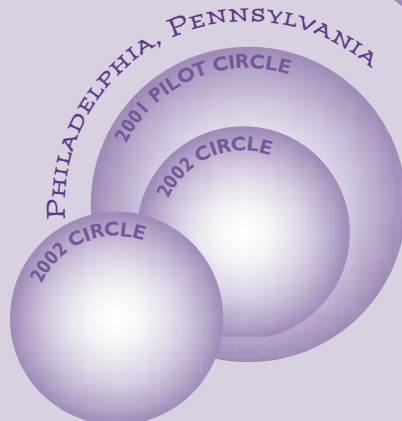
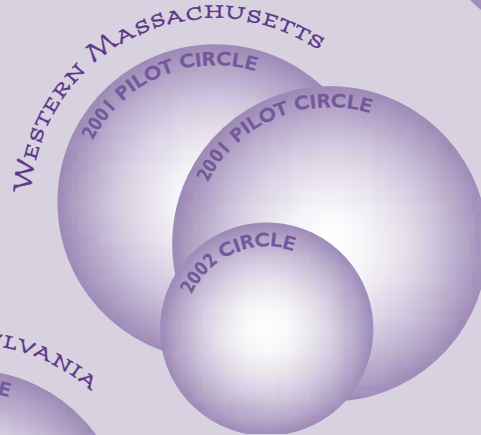
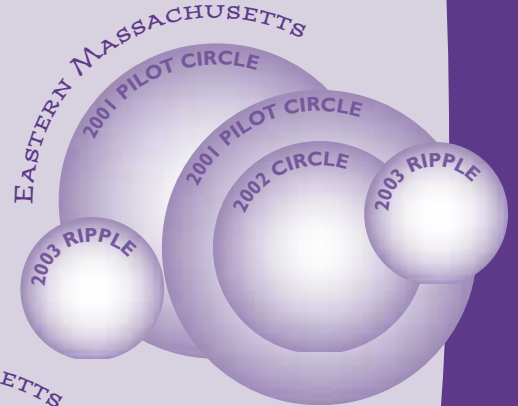
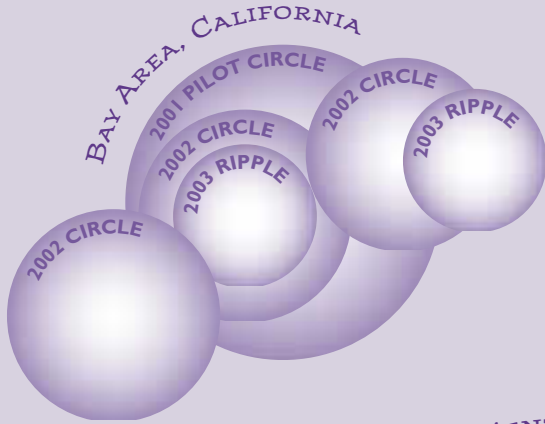
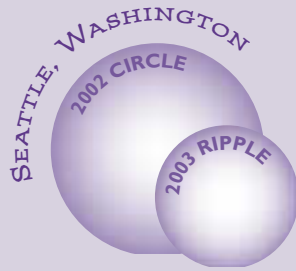
Participatory evaluation makes it possible both to recognize shared interests among, and obtain input from, those doing the work and those the work is designed to help or reach. To do their work, the committee worked with and listened to 44 Circle participants and facilitators in focus groups and interviews, reviewed 28 online survey responses, and examined existing reports by 27 Circle facilitators. The ideas and voices of 75 unique individuals from diverse backgrounds, representing 47 percent of those who participated in the first two rounds of Circles, form the basis of the evaluation. More details on how the committee did their work is provided in the Methods section of the report.

Preparing this report of findings that is designed to be accessible, informative, and inspiring is important to meet the objective of increasing awareness of Circle and spirit-centered approaches to making political and social change by activists in these fields.

What Form Did Our Findings Take?

This report presents three types of findings, and each is presented in a slightly different way:

1. Through weaving together the wisdom and insights of Circle participants and facilitators, clearer and more detailed definitions of the four foundational elements of Circles work emerged: Spirit, Vision, Healing Divisions, and Action. In these four sections, detailed descriptions of the meanings of these elements are included; behaviors and skills that support the work are listed; and supports for, and barriers to, doing the work in Circles (and beyond) are identified. In addition to strengthening Circles of Change work, we hope the language and definitions developed will contribute to increased understanding of language and terms in the field of those working to integrate spirit and action into social change work.
2. The Impacts section shows how the Circles approach and curriculum as a whole impacts Circle participants. This section is rich with the stories and details of Circle participants' experiences. Readers will be able to meet a representative group of Circle participants and learn some of the specifics of their backgrounds and experience in the Circles.
3. Out of the new understanding and knowledge generated from the evaluation and report process, new questions and directions emerge. In the Future Directions section, new questions for future Circles to explore and proposed organizational directions for Spirit in Action to take are outlined.



Spirals of Learning: **The Circles of Change Program**

Activists have expressed a need for increased vision, a place for spirit and community in their political work, ways to decrease fragmentation in the progressive movement, and formats for encouraging “big picture” thinking. Confronted by the challenge of meeting these needs, Spirit in Action staff members Linda Stout and Carolyn Cushing investigated a wide range of models and approaches.

The Circle of Change format that emerged from these investigations has been influenced by two traditions:

Adult education models, particularly as they have been employed in political movements:

Educational programs and leadership development have been central to such twentieth-century movements as the labor, civil rights, and women’s movements. Unlike traditional education, however, in political adult-education learning activities are woven directly into the fabric of action and connected to visions of political transformation. In a well-known example, Citizenship Schools were organized in the early 1960s to teach African Americans the literacy and civics skills needed to pass tests required before registering to vote. By 1963, 26,000 African Americans in 12 states registered to vote after attending these schools. Beyond the immediate goal of registering to vote, however, Citizenship Schools introduced larger concepts of justice and human rights to participants and nurtured their leadership. Septima Clark, founder and coordinator of the program, later wrote, “The basic purpose of the Citizenship Schools is discovering community leaders. It is my belief that creative leadership is present in any community and only awaits discovery and development.”²

Circle forms that grow both from ancient sacred traditions and contemporary adaptations: In her book *The Spiritual Activist*, Claudia Horwitz describes the variety of circles: “Spiritual circles are as old as time and part of many different traditions. Seekers have always benefited from a community that reinforces their journey and supports the quest for authenticity: the Jewish havurah, Christian mission groups, the Buddhist sangha, twelve-step programs, Bible groups, women’s spirituality groups, and many others. When convened and facilitated with intention and dignity, circles spark intense dialogue, ongoing challenge, and powerful relationships.”³


This rich mix of influences has created a Circles of Change Program that is structured yet flexible, with room for innovations and new ideas. The program has, thus, been able to evolve as the form of a spiral moves, integrating and building on the best of what emerges from the Circles experience.

The First Loop of the Spiral: Circles of Change Pilot

Taking into consideration the needs voiced by activists and drawing on the traditions above, Stout and Cushing organized a February 2001 launch of the Circles of Change Program. The focus in this first round of Circles was on testing preliminary tools, including sharing spirit practices that connected participants to wholeness, visioning 25 years into the future, exploring issues of oppression and liberation, and working to understand the connection between spirit and action. The approach selected for this round of Circles, which continues throughout Circles work, was holistic and grounded in the belief that personal, group, and societal transformation need to happen simultaneously. Rather than address these areas separately, Circles were to become a place where the whole range of change work is integrated.

At this time, Spirit in Action faced an unexpected question: Who to involve in the Circles? In conversations with advisors, fellow activists, and friends, Spirit in Action staff were challenged to expand their potential Circle members beyond political activists already engaged with an organization or committed to particular issue work. A colleague of Stout’s, who left movement work because it exhausted her and felt unhealthy, asked, “How can you change the way that work is done if you are not involving people with new and different perspectives?” Spirit in Action’s definition of “activist” was expanded to broadly include all those who believe another world is possible and are willing to take action to create this world. This expanded definition opened the door for current political and spirit-inspired activists as well as those not currently involved in an organized change effort to join the Circles.

From its network of grassroots contacts, Spirit in Action recruited a group of seven facilitators willing to wade into the uncharted waters of a pilot Circle of Change. Spirit in Action looked for people



with prior group facilitation experience and a network of connections with both political and spirit-inspired activists in their local area. Facilitators then gathered for a week of training, in which they were introduced to existing tools and asked to add their own tools and wisdom to the developing curriculum.

Following the training, facilitators returned to their homes to recruit for and lead Circles of six sessions in the Bay Area, Philadelphia, Boston, Cape Cod, and Western Massachusetts (two Circles). As part of their duties, facilitators shared reports with each other and talked after each session with Spirit in Action staff. This intensive communication proved critical in assessing and finding ways to improve the program. After this round of action, facilitators returned to Spirit in Action for three days of reflection, feedback, community building, and program development.

This first round yielded strong foundations of program strengths to continue and revealed areas to be developed or added.

Pilot Circle Strengths

- Cross-fertilization of ideas among Circle participants whose daily work focuses on different core issues and political frameworks. Sharing food, a much appreciated part of the gatherings, fosters informal connections.
- Telling stories develops trust and a sense of community within the group, helps Circle participants move through problems, and informs analysis with concrete examples of conflict and change.
- Structure and support, such as session outlines and phone consultations with Spirit in Action staff, particularly for the facilitators, make Circles more effective.
- The vision provided by Spirit in Action that the Circles are part of a national effort to develop a movement for transformational social change.

Areas to Be Developed

- Ground visions of the future in current positive realities and provide facilitators more tools for addressing the hopelessness that often arises as a group attempts to vision.
- Strengthen the work around developing consciousness about movement building.
- Integrate the spirit-focused work and the action component.
- Increase the diversity of participants, particularly regarding racial/ethnic diversity.

The Second Loop of the Spiral: Thirteen-Session Circles of Change

Addressing the reflections of the first round, Spirit in Action staff, now expanded to include Jerry Koch-Gonzalez as Circles Program Coordinator, and pilot Circle facilitators, worked to improve and expand the program in significant ways. Tools and approaches that had yielded the greatest impact, such as storytelling, sharing food, and providing support to facilitators, were included and expanded. Objectives focused on filling some of the gaps of the last round, particularly in the areas of strengthening the connections between spirit, vision, and movement building. A four-stage model with steps of Discovery, Visioning, Design, and Inspired Action was used as an organizing structure for the curriculum.

The most important innovation in this round was the institution of multiracial facilitation teams. To achieve this goal, Spirit in Action recruited new facilitators (including five people who

Overview of the 2002 Circle of Change Curriculum

For sample activities, visit www.spiritinaction.net.

What should happen in every session:

- Openings and closings
- Intention setting for the session
- Check-ins
- Food
- Something that feeds the soul of the group (song, art, etc.)
- Gather info from participants on insights and questions from the session to be shared with other Circles.

Optional threads that grow out of participants' hopes could include activities such as:

- Goal/intention setting and support for more fully living our values
- Members identification of how they want to strengthen spirit and/or action practice
- Time for individual transformation work with group support
- Social identity caucus check-ins
- Ongoing attention to group building and dynamics.

Session One and Two: Introductions

- Participant introductions
- Introduce Circles of Change and Spirit in Action

Sessions Three–Five: Discovery

Discovery Interviews and Activities—choosing 2–3 topics from among:
hope
community building
social change
spirit in action
liberation
movement building

Sessions Six–Eight: Vision

- Vision questions and activities on world and movement we want to build
- Enactments/creative representations of the vision

Sessions Nine–Eleven: Design

- Possibility Statements
- Developing action ideas & plans

Sessions Twelve–Thirteen: Inspired Action

- Future of group and resources needed
- Fundraising

Final reflection and report out of Circle learnings

- Appreciative evaluation of Circle and participants
- Closure

SPIRALS

had been Circle participants in the pilot round) and trained all 27 facilitators in an expanded 13-session Circle of Change Program. Upon their return home, facilitation teams were supported to recruit Circles with significant diversity in regard to race/ethnicity, age, spirit perspective, and issue work. New Circles began in Seattle, the Bay Area, Louisville, Philadelphia, Western Massachusetts, and Boston.

Facilitator and staff reflection at the end of this second round yielded three particular highlights: a framework for articulating Circles of Change focus; a diverse leadership core committed to moving Circles forward as a tool for social transformation; and an increasingly large toolbox for doing the work of Circles.

The Framework When facilitators reconvened after the second round, they identified a framework for articulating Spirit in Action's contributions to movement building:

- Creating collective visions of a positive future and communicating these visions to a broad audience;
- Including a connection to spirit, which Spirit in Action defines as wholeness, in social justice work;
- Healing divisions and creating cooperation across lines of difference; and
- Taking action for individual, cultural, and systemic change.

The work of community building in and beyond Circles is an integral part of each element. Community building functions as support to doing all work and to building a broad-based movement.

Diverse Leadership The 27 Circle facilitators and leaders modeled the vision of broad diversity for Circle membership. Facilitators worked on a wide range of issues in their activist lives, including: women and girls' empowerment; Colombia solidarity; prison reform; environmental activism; gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender rights; educational reform and student empowerment; cross-border organizing; college campus organizing; cultural activism; anti-racism work; and anti-corporate globalization activism. They brought a broad range of spiritual perspectives to the program. Fifty-two percent were people of color, and 48 percent were white. They ranged in age from their 20s to their 60s. Participants

came from a similar range of social and activist identities, and described their spirit perspectives in many different ways. The number of perspectives represented in each Circle ranged from four to ten, and included Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Muslim, Wiccan, agnostic, “seeking,” and “looking for a spiritual home,” to name just a few examples.

A Growing Toolbox Along with their network of connections across diverse communities, Circle facilitators brought an exciting variety of skills and gifts to their work. Some brought experience with theater techniques, others art therapy. Many translated the wisdom of their spirit practices into secular tools for use in supporting Circles. While these tools were noted in Circle reports, more work was needed to fully explain them for others to use and to effectively place them into the context of the new Circles framework.

The Third Loop of the Spiral: Evaluation and Curriculum Development

As described in the introduction, Spirit in Action staff faced a choice after completing the 2002 round of Circles: focus energy on training and organizing for an increased number of Circles, or devote time and resources to improving the Circles model and, in particular, integrating the new framework and toolbox into the curriculum. Continuing Spirit in Action’s practice of listening and consultation as a basis for planning, conversations began with Circle facilitators and participants around the country, as well as with organizational advisors, to find the most appropriate way to advance the work of Circles. Spirit in Action staff determined that an interwoven evaluation, report, and curriculum-development process lead by Circle facilitators and involving as many Circle participants as possible would create the necessary foundation for further development.

Staff began recruiting Circle facilitators representing diverse backgrounds and locations to serve on the Evaluation and Report Committee. Karen Hutchinson (Bay Area), Pamela Freeman (Philadelphia), Scherazade Duruvalla King (Boston), and Natalie Reteneller (Louisville) agreed to serve on the committee. Spirit in Action staff member Carolyn Cushing facilitated the work of the group, and Spirit in Action director Linda Stout participated in all committee gatherings.

At the first convening of the committee, the group grounded themselves in the purpose of the evaluation and report and developed a focus for their work. Assisted by Evaluation and Organizational Development Consultant Diane Johnson, Ph.D., the committee narrowed and organized their investigation into three areas:

Meanings, Supports, and Barriers How do Circle participants define the work of connecting spirit and social justice, developing positive vision, healing divisions and creating collaborations, and taking action for transformative change? What supported, and what were the barriers to, the work of spirit, vision, healing, and action?

Impacts What was the impact of Circle participation on the individual, the Circle as a developing community, the wider community in which participants work or live, and the movement for transformative change?

Design and Process What activities best supported the work in each area? What aspects of the overall atmosphere, process, or resources supported the most impact? What facilitation practices supported the most impact? What flow increased supports and lessened barriers?

This report focuses on findings in the areas of Meanings, Supports, Barriers, and Impacts. The Evaluation and Report Committee shared all findings with a Curriculum Development Committee, also formed of Circle facilitators, who are preparing a Circles of Change Curriculum Guide for publication in the fall of 2004. (For further details, visit Spirit in Action’s web site at www.spiritinaction.net.)

The four sections that follow provide definitions, details, and an outline of Supports and Barriers for doing the work of Spirit, Vision, Healing Divisions, and Action. As the committee examined the data, however, it also identified overarching Supports and Barriers to doing movement-building work that integrates these four elements. These main themes described on the next page are carried over into the sections that follow.

Supports to a Circles Approach to Movement Building

SUPPORT	DESCRIPTION
Circles Intention	The awareness created by naming the elements of spirit, vision, healing, and action inspired participants to join Circles and then gave them the language they needed to talk about this kind of change work with people beyond Circles.
Circles Structure and Activities	Even when the Circles curriculum did not perfectly match the needs of all Circles, participants recognized that it gave them a purpose and a support for continuing to gather. Many of the activities provided powerful and unique opportunities for personal growth as well as deeper understanding of the work of social change.
Leadership/Facilitation	Skilled, trained, and supported facilitators were critical to the success of Circles.
Storytelling	From the earliest round of Circles, stories and storytelling have functioned as powerful tools. As one facilitator observed, "People, before telling their stories, were staying in their boxes."
Diverse Community	The relationships formed in Circles created a sense of community that increased people's commitment to one another and to the work. That this community was diverse was important and inspiring to Circle participants.

Barriers to a Circles Approach to Movement Building

BARRIER	DESCRIPTION
Preconceived or Limited Definitions	Spirit in Action has often been challenged on the use of its key words: spirit, movement building, healing, and action. Hearers bring a wide range of different meanings to these words. This report seeks to clarify these words and outline the definitions that guide Spirit in Action's work.
Activist Culture	The mainstream of political activism has certain tendencies that, if taken to extremes, have negative impacts on activists themselves and inhibit them from reaching a wider audience with their messages. A focus on achieving goals, for example, to the exclusion of all else, including activists' health or building of a supportive community, is detrimental to the progressive movement as a whole. Spirit in Action seeks to expand the techniques, tools, and language for making change in this country so that a healthy progressive movement can grow and reach more people.
Time	The culture of the United States is on fast-forward. There are multiple demands on people's time. Activists' urgent desire for change causes them to put on hold activities that are not directly connected to their issue. All these realities conspire to keep activists, in particular, from joining Circles.
Weakness in the 2002 Circle Curriculum	Participants and facilitators identified the following most critical need: slow the pace of the curriculum, clarify the focus of vision work, add more tools for healing divisions, and strengthen the action component. Some participants also suggested different tracks for Circles with activists with more or less experience.

Spirit

Spirit is alive in all of us and defies a simple definition. In Circles, diverse manifestations of spirit connect those who are passionate about justice with a sustaining and consciousness-expanding source of inspiration.



wholeness • heart • intention • energy

Spirit is a word difficult to fully define. It evokes a wide range of responses and beliefs in the hearer. Merriam-Webster's Dictionary defines spirit as "an animating or vital principle held to give life to physical organisms." At the start of Circles, Spirit in Action invited participants to define spirit as a connection to wholeness. Perhaps because of their broadness, these definitions compel people to think of more concrete examples of spirit: their spiritual practice, a current or childhood religion, or a natural or otherworldly entity. And spirit exists in all these realities and experiences.

Without a simple definition, participants have reflected on their experience in the Circle to create clarity about spirit's meaning. A Louisville participant, for example, spoke of the pervasiveness of spirit:

Spirit is more. It is an energy and it is shared. Spirit plays a part in every meeting. We did not have to create spirit through a ritual or ceremony. It was already there. It is alive within all of us. We are all open to sharing that and getting into each other's space, eating each other's food, and really just sharing spirit with one another.

Although there is no one way to define spirit, Spirit in Action and Circle participants have developed an understanding of spirit and how a shared awareness of spirit can impact their work together. Their ideas about spirit fall into three broad areas described in the following pages. These areas lie at the core of Spirit in Action's understanding of spirit, particularly as it connects to the work of political and social transformation.



connection • consciousness • inner guidance • support

Spirit is inclusive, and diverse groups benefit when spirit is allowed to be present, honored, and shared in its many forms. Circles welcomed participants from diverse spirit perspectives. The majority in the first two Circle rounds could identify with the label "spiritual," while others spoke of their connection to a specific religion or a deep connection to nature or a soul voice within themselves. Some were atheist, some were agnostic. The number of spirit perspectives in Circles ranged from a smaller group in which four perspectives were represented (Christian, Buddhist, Jewish, and Native American spirituality), to a Circle that identified participants' predominately Christian childhood religions with an added notation of "seeking" next to each name, to a group that listed ten variations, including "no tradition/meditation practice," Baha'i, and Quaker/Pagan.

Sharing of participants' spirit perspectives did not come automatically. Although participants yearned to more fully integrate the spirit that inspires them into their lives and work, certain obstacles prevented deep sharing and learning from that sharing. Participants talked of "being shy" about sharing their beliefs and practices. Some, those who identified as Wiccan, for example, still experience discrimination and denigration of their practices. Others carried past feelings and unresolved hurts, often from childhood religious experiences. Some religious stances on homosexuality have been deeply wounding to gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered people. Often aware of, and sensitive to, this reality, those who adhered to traditional religions, particularly Christians, did not want to impose their faith on others in the Circle.

Finally, a discussion has continued among Circle participants on the appropriateness of using practices or traditions that are not from one's family background. With the mainstream culture's varied responses of ignoring, denigrating, or appropriating without full understanding what is sacred to others, the exploration and use of other spirit practices comes with a complex and difficult history.



To enter into this challenging territory, Circle facilitators introduced activities and created an open atmosphere to invite expression and sharing of all perspectives. Two key and interrelated learnings arose from this work. The first is the importance of using diverse and inclusive language when talking about spirit. There are so many ways to name spirit, and those names can both inspire and cause pain. In one of the first Circle sessions, for example, a participant leading an exercise exclusively used the word God. Later, another participant shared his pain with the naming of spirit in this way. After discussion, the Circle group decided that each person would call spirit with their own name, and that all names would be welcomed. Growing from this learning, over the course of a number of Circles, staff and facilitators recognized the importance of an activity early in the life of a Circle that allows participants to share their spirit perspectives. When all spirit perspectives and faith traditions are acknowledged and honored in this way, people can bring this source of inspiration without others feeling as if it is being imposed on them. As a Philadelphia Circle facilitator reflected after leading prayers before a meal: “Activists of different colors, classes, ages, genders, and religions can gather and pray—and it can actually happen without anyone getting hurt, offended, or ripped off. Amazing.”

A Louisville participant articulated the result of this broad recognition of spirit this way:

(The Circle) forced us to have a very complex view of spirituality. Because we did have people who considered themselves atheists, Christians, or pagans, when you get here and you come together to share that spiritual space, you have to discuss that stuff and what it means to you. It just gave me such a deeper understanding of the people that were in the group and what my spirituality means to me. It made an impact because it showed the complexity of every individual here and the complexity of the group by having all those belief systems in the same space. People feel safe and that is nice.

SPIRIT PROFILE:

April Rosenblum
young Jewish anarchist,
actor, and Circle
participant

“My Circle helped me realize that even though their doctrine is anti-religion, all these Communists in my life I’ve butted heads with are the most intensely spiritual people. They want people to be happy.”



Awareness of spirit supports a shift in consciousness, fostering a greater sense of connectedness among group members and assisting people to view concepts often seen as conflicting—such as spirit and action—as parts of a whole rather than opposites. The formal invitation of spirit to be present increases people’s awareness of their own inspiring conception of spirit. This conception, in all its many forms, calls people to live out their highest values and possibilities. For many people—Circle participants and the general public—these highest values and aspirations are not lived out in the institutions of the wider society, such as the workplace and the media. A Boston Circle participant pointed out “how easy it is to get consumed with the material, or with the tangible, that you don’t touch base back again with what is real, which is this connection (to the gift of spirit).”

The Circle atmosphere, like other spaces that intentionally draw attention to spirit, allows people to turn down the volume on the noise of the wider society. Each participant who listens to what exists beyond that noise receives a different message. A Seattle participant described recognizing spirit and the lessons that can come from spirit when looking at plants and “seeing how they actually breathe.” He shared, “I started seeing forces much bigger than myself by looking at things much smaller than me.” As perspectives shift, peoples’ ways of interacting with the world shift. Circle participants named their most common shifts as an increased sense of connectedness to the group and a new integration of concepts they had formerly viewed as opposed such as spirit in action.

When spirit has a central place in the life of a group, the atmosphere “creates connection and dissolves separateness” in the words of a Bay Area participant. A number of participants in very different Circles talked of their increased ability to connect spirit and action. A Philadelphia participant talked of “evolving to hold spirit and activism both in consciousness” and described how she had lead a workshop on globalization at the place where she studies and teaches yoga. Other participants spoke of the power of bringing spirit-centered tools into their workplaces, activist organizations, and families.

An ongoing and deepening connection to spirit allows social change activists to access the inner resources needed to “be the change they wish to see in the world.”

A call for change is at the core of activist work, but it is most often directed to the external world. The presence of spirit in Circles gives participants a powerful support to be “the change we want to see for others in ourselves,” as expressed in a Seattle participant’s paraphrase of the famous Gandhi quote.

In the Circles, participants allowed beliefs and behaviors to shift and thus experienced a changed—and very positive—way of being and working together. They talked about how they wished other areas of their lives operated in similar ways. A Bay Area participant, for example, shared, “I kept thinking, ‘I wish our staff meetings were like this.’ I wish all meetings were like this. At the beginning inviting spirit (helped me remember) that there is something out there that connects us, and we are going to work through our differences with the help of this thing.” These deep connections, which nurture respect and create a foundation for collective action, are central, though often hidden, aspects of the history of change.

The work of change may have as many faces as spirit. Campaigns, for example, whether educational, electoral, or direct action, require different strategies and tactics to meet the needs and realities of their moment and history. At the heart of change work, however, people are required to come together and act collaboratively and productively.

To engage in spirit-centered work for change in the Circles and beyond, participants should be supported to develop the following attitudes and skills:

- Be willing to share spirit perspectives and practices. Circles create a space for full and open sharing, which may facilitate new insights and openings for all participants. For some the sharing of their spirit perspective may stir up past hurts in their fellow participants. Both the sharing and the stirring up can become entry points for healing. Facilitators work carefully to support this.
- Be willing to learn about the spirit practices of others. Sometimes we carry misconceptions, bias, and prejudices both conscious and unconscious against some spirit perspectives. If these arise, examine them, search for their source, question their validity, or seek reconciliation.
- Be willing to create with fellow Circle members new activities, rituals, or practices that draw from the multiple spirit perspectives present. A Philadelphia Circle developed a pattern of blessings before meals and singing as part of every closing. The Louisville Circle worked through members’ discomfort with the concept of an altar by reframing their opening as intentional sharing space, where they spoke their inspirations that were sometimes connected to a guiding theme or question.



- Watch for cultural appropriation. Given the complex and sometimes difficult history of interaction between religions and spiritual traditions, when sharing or using the practices of others, do so with great respect. A good guideline is to present and use only the spirit practices of those present in the Circle. That way someone truly grounded in the spirit practices can make sure all is done appropriately. Healing the wounds of history calls us to honor the right of people to have ownership of, and authority over, their own traditions.
- Return to spirit over and over again throughout the Circle and beyond. Spirit is always present to lead us.

READER REFLECTION

WHAT DO YOU UNDERSTAND OR FEEL SPIRIT TO BE?

HOW DO YOU BRING SPIRIT INTO YOUR FAMILY, YOUR JOB, OR YOUR WORK FOR SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CHANGE?

WHERE IN YOUR LIFE WOULD YOU LIKE TO INCREASE THE PRESENCE OF SPIRIT?

Supports That Facilitated the Work of Spirit in Circles

SUPPORT	SPECIFICS, DETAILS, AND EXAMPLES
Intention of Circles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Naming the importance of integrating spirit into social justice work called people to explore and be open to the connection of spirit and action. ■ Creation of an atmosphere in Circles that included attention to community building, reflection, and play, which supported people to remain aware of spirit even in time of conflict or in activities focused in other areas. ■ Welcoming all spirit perspectives.
Structure of the Circles Curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Circles began and ended with a formal activity that called people to be aware of spirit. ■ Circles included a time for sharing a meal together.
Leadership/ Facilitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Facilitators recognized that spirit is inclusive and welcomed and honored the spirit perspectives of all members. ■ Facilitators had already begun to explore the connection between spirit and action before leading Circles.
Activities	<p>Many activities supported the spirit work of Circles, including: creating altars, taking people out into nature, Spirit in Action Journey Maps, and the many Circle openings and closings developed by facilitators and participants. Further information will be available in the forthcoming Circles of Change Curriculum Guide. Visit www.spiritinaction.net for more information.</p>



Barriers to Integrating Spirit and Social Justice Work

BARRIER	DESCRIPTION	WAYS TO WORK WITH BARRIERS
Preconceived or limited definitions of what spirit is or what form its practice should take	Equating spirit only with spiritual practices or religious traditions and thus excluding those whose spirit inspiration grows from heart values or a connection with nature, for example.	Share definitions and highlights of spirit developed as part of this report.
Past and continuing homophobic and sexist messages and practices on the part of religious institutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Many gays, lesbians, bisexual, and transgendered people are attacked and/or excluded by some religious institutions. ■ Many religious institutions are dominated by men and enact or support policies harmful to women. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Recognize that people are different from institutions and that many are actively working to transform the religious institutions to which they belong. ■ Allow both the anger against the wrongs of some aspects of religion and the gifts of religion to be held in the Circle. ■ Strong and supported facilitators, who can share resources about getting help outside of the Circle, are needed.
Participants from mainstream religions, Christians most particularly, feel that they cannot share their spirit perspectives because they will hurt others.	Not wanting to cause pain to their fellow participants or believing that their spirit perspectives “take up more room,” participants do not share what inspires them about their faith.	In addition to the above, facilitators should focus on the inclusivity of spirit and create safe ways for all to participate.
Activist culture	As one Circle participant said, “little old spirit has a bad reputation” in activist Circles.	Highlight how inviting spirit can support and inspire activists in their work for external change.



Vision

Circles vision work supports collective imagination of a positive future. This creative work serves as an inspiration and a foundation for the action work of making deep and lasting social change.



positive • collective • inspiring

Circles vision work is a response to activists' desire to "talk about what we are for rather than what we are against" and grows from Spirit in Action Director Linda Stout's decades of work to encourage long-term positive visions of the future.

In the 1980s and early '90s, Linda founded and directed the Piedmont Peace Project (PPP), a multiracial group of low-income activists working on peace and justice issues in a conservative region of North Carolina. Despite opposition by conservative politicians and intense harassment by the Ku Klux Klan, PPP succeeded in achieving goals such as the cleanup of a local toxic waste site, registering 44,000 new voters, and shifting their Congressman's voting record on peace issues from zero to 83 percent. Long-term visioning was part of the PPP culture that supported people to be able to believe in success despite the odds they face. Questions and planning processes that invite people to think 25 years into the future were woven into the way PPP worked and included as part of staff meetings, community organizing activities, and donor events.

When Linda began her visioning work with PPP, she could find few models or theoretical supports for this work. Through the process of developing Circles of Change, however, Spirit in Action staff and facilitators have been exposed to a wide body of theory and practice of successful visioning. Elise Boulding, for example, a Spirit in Action advisor and eminent sociologist, translated *The Image of the Future* by Dutch futurist Fred Polak in the early 1970s. In this study, Polak examines 1,500 years of Western beliefs and concludes that a society's image of itself becomes a road map for its future. Those societies with positive and vital images flourish while those with uninspired images stagnate. Negative images move a society toward hopelessness, destruction, and the



VISION

values-based • hopeful • possible • creative • intuitive

unraveling of the social fabric. In the 1970s, Boulding found herself working with disarmament groups and asking the questions: "How will the world function when we don't have armies any more? How will conflicts be managed?" These questions became the basis for her 30-year visioning workshop conducted with disarmament and peace activists across the globe.⁴

Polak's work has become influential in a number of fields. He is cited in time management expert Steven Covey's work⁵ as well as Ray and Anderson's study of "Cultural Creatives," the 26 percent of the U.S. population that shares such values as a love of nature, global awareness, a commitment to sustainability, an emphasis on education, a belief in the importance of spirituality, and a concern about the issues of women and children.⁶ Polak's essential idea of the importance of positive images for societal growth has also entered into the fields of business and organizational development, including an increasingly popular approach to strategic planning, Appreciative Inquiry (AI). AI leads organizations through an examination of what has been successful in the life of the organization and then uses this information as the foundation for future planning. AI has been applied successfully by organizations such as manufacturer Hunter Douglas; in a peace and community development processes in Nagaland, India; and by United Religions Initiative, an international, multi-faith network working for peace. Based on their years of successful work AI practitioners Whitney and Trosten-Bloom note, "Human systems are like plants; they organically and instinctively grow in the direction of their light source, which is the collective image of the future."⁷

As part of the Circles curriculum, participants took on the challenge of looking 25 years into the future, and as they did so developed insights into, and understanding of, the challenges and rewards of visioning. Weaving together the existing research and the Circle participants' actual experience, four key statements about Circles' visioning work emerge.

An orientation toward positive possibilities is needed. Social change activists are steeped in a tradition of critique and criticism. This work has been necessary to understand how oppression

operates on the systemic, interpersonal, and individual levels. This deep intellectual understanding of what is not working in society, however, needs to be combined with a mental, emotional, and spiritual understanding of what is possible as we move toward our highest values and hopes. Without this inspiration, activists can lose hope that another world is possible. Vision work in some Circles, particularly in the pilot round, was derailed by the hopelessness experienced by some group members.

Many Circle participants, particularly when using the strengthened curriculum of the second round, welcomed the opportunity for positive exploration of the future. Following an activity that invited Bay Area participants to create a picture of their desired future, the facilitator reflected, “So much of what ‘activists’ do can be seen as reactionary—it seems that we are always against something. In this exercise, we made the conscious effort to keep things positive, and I think most people in the group saw it as a breath of fresh air.” This sentiment was echoed in Louisville, Kentucky, when a Circle participant offered, “Being in a space where we actually got to share what we believe the world could be like and how we believe the world could be good, as opposed to just talking about all the problems we see, was really important.”

Both grounding in current positive realities and creative leaps of imagination are building blocks of visioning work. In these times, those who work for equality, justice, peace, and sustainability seem to face a daunting task. The distance needed to reach a shift in U.S. consciousness seems infinite. There is, however, a great history of social movements that began with visions that seemed equally impossible. Slaves, despite a whole social and legal system designed to enslave them, dreamed of, and actively worked for freedom. White Quakers began to work for slavery’s abolition while it was still an unquestioned economic practice. Suffragists had never voted, yet they believed they deserved this right. Their dream of equality may have grown from observing the rights and equal treatment accorded the Native women who lived in close proximity to the many suffragists in upstate New York.⁸ Participants in Circles also identified seeds of possibilities through inquiry activities.

VISION PERSPECTIVE:
Hamlet Mateo
teacher, practicing Buddhist,
two-time Circle participant

“I have learned that although Buddhism helps you accept the present, at least for me, taking care of what is in front of you depends on where you want to go in the future. This is how one comes to terms with hope. Sometimes in my line of work, hope is all there is, and things begin moving.”



Discussion of community gardens, racial reconciliation programs, and solar houses—realities they knew existed currently—provided the spark of inspiration for imagining more widespread shifts on the societal level.

Another inspiration for visioning is imaginative and creative work that stimulates right-brained, intuitive skills. From this place, people often are able to transcend limits and make connections beyond what seems possible in the current context. Tools such as visual and expressive arts or creative visualizations support this work and have been a vital and dynamic part of Circles. Meditations are lead, pictures drawn, and murals created. This gives the work an increased specificity and power. A Louisville participant contrasted her past understanding of her work for change with her understanding following visioning in the Circle:

I remember feeling clarity ... there is an idea that we work for peace or we work for social justice or we work for this. But what does it look like? I never actually sat down and did a mental picture or a scribble on paper, so it was having that clarity ... I wonder why that isn’t incorporated into school curriculums and things like that?

Through the creative process, a concrete picture of abstract words, such as equality or love, emerges, and those who are passionate about creating a better world now have a concrete and compelling image to share with others.

Circles visioning is a collective activity. Individuals, groups, and whole societies can engage in an exploration of their desired futures. The work of the Circles focuses on the group or collective level. A Bay Area participant spoke of the importance of working on this level by saying:

I never really thought about the importance of creating and having positive visions. When I heard this before, (I thought) it was part of a New Age sort of thing: ‘I think this and I manifest what I want.’ (Now) I think you can use all these tools to create something good for the larger community and also other things for the larger group. That was something I really appreciated.

As people share their ideas and pictures of the future, they come to see both commonality and differences in their visions. There is not a singular vision of the desired world; instead there are multiple streams of visions that grow from individuals' particular life experiences and areas of knowledge. These streams are not unrelated, but rather interdependent. Following the creation of an art mural to represent people's visions of the future, one of the facilitators reported:

I think the main realization that we came away with is that our visions for an ideal tomorrow are diverse and yet strikingly interdependent. I could not imagine any one of the visions existing without the others; it seems that the collage embodies the complex web of interaction that holds all of the different structures in the world in place.

The realization that one exists within and is held by a web of people visioning a better world is a powerful support for the work, especially when the situation on the political level seems so different from the desired vision.

Vision is a foundation for action. The work of visioning has an intrinsic connection to action for change. As described in the Action section, Spirit in Action views action as a continuum that includes personal change work, relationship and community building, and direct political action to enact systemic change. Vision supports the work on all these levels. One Louisville participant offered, "The vision for me is the belief that we are change and that change is happening." A peer echoed her thoughts with, "This is really a mini-version of what we are all hoping for anyways. It seems really inspirational." As Circle participants work to change themselves, create their concrete images of a positive future, and vision collectively, they are taking steps toward the change enacted on a societal scale.

To engage in visioning work in the Circles and beyond, participants should be supported to develop the following attitudes and skills:

- **Taking risks, particularly to engage in something new.** Many Circle participants were unfamiliar with visioning work, and this unfamiliarity often contributed to their skepticism. Those who were able to put their skepticism aside and dip their toe into the new way of looking at the world found it rewarding. A Western Massachusetts Circle participant who went on to train as a facilitator, for example, did not believe she had the ability to vision. After engaging in visioning and using tools of positive inquiry, she realized that this work resonated with her on a deep level, and she has integrated it effectively into her systems change work with public schools.
- **Developing a willingness to engage with right-brained tools such as the arts and visualizations.** Although many people have been conditioned to think that they are not creative or artistic, the tools of the imagination are available to all, and Circle participants, even those who did not feel very artistic, found them a vital support to visioning. When such tools are introduced into Circles, facilitators explain that the purpose of the activity is not to create great art but to support creative and innovative thinking.



- **Cultivating hope and possibility.** In a Philadelphia Circle discussion, for example, two women of color spoke of how there was no social change situation in which they felt hopeless. They speculated that African American like themselves hold onto hope because, if they believed that things could not change, they would become depressed. This hope and belief in the possibility of change fueled the southern civil rights movement and other movements to achieve many of their dreams and radically alter U.S. society.
- **Having patience.** Change, especially the kind that calls for deep transformation of individuals and institutions, takes time. A Louisville participant talked about the challenges of working for change: “Coming from a society of instant gratification and we need to see results. So if you have goals that seem a million miles away it is like you are treading water and not getting anywhere.” If, however, we look from the hindsight of history, we see the length of time needed for change. At a recent Circle curriculum meeting, for example, the group examined a timeline of moments in gay and lesbian liberation in the U.S., beginning with a growth spurt in the 1950s and culminating in court recognition of same-sex marriage in 2004. This story twists through a landscape of individual empowerment and healing, political organizing, and legal and societal recognition. There is no shortcutting the time needed for making political change.

READER REFLECTION

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE CURRENT PROJECTS OR PEOPLE YOU KNOW ABOUT THAT INSPIRE YOU TO BELIEVE POSITIVE CHANGE IS POSSIBLE?

IMAGINE IT IS 30 YEARS IN THE FUTURE AND THESE POSITIVE PROJECTS AND PEOPLE ARE HAVING A REAL IMPACT. WHAT DOES YOUR COMMUNITY LOOK LIKE? HOW HAS SOCIETY CHANGED?



VISION

Supports That Facilitated the Work of Visioning

SUPPORT	SPECIFICS TO VISIONING
Intention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The intention to be positive and build from what works was refreshing to Circle participants. ■ The opportunity to turn abstract ideas (love, equality, justice) into concrete pictures was eye-opening and inspiring.
Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ There were specific activities for engaging the Circle in visioning. ■ The Circles curriculum was sequenced to preparing the group for visioning by grounding them in positive realities through inquiry into, and sharing information about, current trends, projects, or people that express positive qualities of justice, equality, peace, and sustainability. ■ The Circles curriculum included activities that created an outlet and container for hopelessness.
There is a history of visionary movements.	As one participant summarized, “Revolutions have happened. They have happened in our country. They happen all over the world. If we all have the same vision and the same frame of mind, we can have justice ... The vision for me is the belief that we are change and that change is happening.”
Activities	Many art and meditation/visualization activities were used effectively to support visioning work. A booklet of positive inquiry questions developed by Spirit in Action staff and facilitators provided a good grounding for visioning work. Further details will be available in the Circles of Change Curriculum Guide. For further information, see www.spiritinaction.net .

Barriers to Visioning

BARRIER	DESCRIPTION/EXAMPLES	WAYS TO WORK WITH BARRIERS
People's spiritual or religious traditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Buddhist orientation to the present moment and progressive reality as an illusion conflict with visioning the future. ■ A Christian view that real change will only come in the hereafter. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Respect and inquire into the beliefs that conflict with visioning work. ■ Share stories of how past participants from these traditions had positive visioning experiences.
Preconceived ideas about visioning	Beliefs that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Visioning is not grounded in reality. ■ Visioning is self-indulgent and individualistic. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Connect vision work to current positive realities. ■ Connect visioning to collective work for the common good.
Different levels of experience with visioning	Some people have experience with visioning while others do not. Even those who have done vision work may not have done it in a collective setting.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Clearly explain activity and reasons for doing it. If trust is strong enough, ask them to trust you and experiment with it. ■ Provide an assessment tool for facilitators to use to gauge the comfort level with/orientation toward visioning before it begins.
Activist culture	The predominant culture of activism is one of critique, criticism, and sometimes, intolerance for different approaches. Visioning is not viewed as action or valid.	Show that this approach can be helpful in social change groups such as the Piedmont Peace Project founded by Linda Stout, and thus, effective in creating external change.
Some people are more left-brained than right-brained.	Artistic and imaginative approaches will not immediately resonate with some ways of being in the world.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Acknowledge that this activity might call upon skills that are out of participants' comfort zones. Encourage people to try. ■ Connect visioning to something concrete or follow up with an activity that is more left-brained.
Internalized oppression	This can limit people's ability to imagine a better future.	Provide structure and support for doing this work, including examples of positive future realities that people can use as a launching board for their own visions.
Depression	Psychological problems can temporarily make it very difficult to vision.	Facilitators need ideas for helping people to seek assistance outside of the Circle.
The flow of the 2002 Circles curriculum did not connect vision to action strongly enough.	The four-stage model with steps of Discovery, Visioning, Design, and Inspired Action, which was adapted from Appreciate Inquiry methodology, did not serve to make this connection.	Reshaping the flow of the Circles curriculum is underway as part of the curriculum development process.

Healing Divisions

Circles grow from the belief that building diverse community is not only possible, but also essential to making broad-based change in the United States. To enjoy the privilege and responsibility of being in diverse community, people are called to recognize that all share both a common humanity and particular social identities, which accord power in unbalanced ways. Bridging this power divide is at the heart of healing divisions.



building bridges • overcoming oppression

Circles shine a light on the need for the healing of the divisions that exist between people involved in working for positive social change. Although those who work for a better world may share similar visions, the realities of living in an imperfect society shape the attitudes, behaviors, and interactions of all.

The activists interviewed as part of Peace Development Fund's Listening Project, for example, identified fragmentation between people and groups working for change as a major obstacle to building an effective movement. They traced the fragmentation back to multiple sources, including: isolation of activists and their organizations; competition between organizations for funding dollars; and the impacts of oppression, not just in the wider society, but within social change activists themselves.

Working in under-resourced organizations, activists are called to focus their time and energy on meeting their immediate work goals. The result often is that there is little time for connecting with those working on related issues, limiting the ability of groups to make wider connections and develop a network of allies. This isolation is heightened in areas that are also isolated geographically and contributes to tensions between local groups and national organizations. Without a sense of connection, activists can begin to view each other as competitors rather than collaborators in doing the work for social change. Add into the equation the limited number of foundation grants, and the activists and organizations seeking funding are compelled to identify their projects, strategies, and results as the most significant and effective. A Listening Project participant, for example, reported, "Everybody is trying to get the same dollar from the foundation community and it has created enemies among friends."

diverse community • shifting perceptions • power with

The effects of oppression that spring from activists, differing social identities (race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, abilities, language, religion, age, etc.) continue to be potent points of conflict. Although activists certainly share an intellectual understanding of, and commitment to, social justice and equality, working through personal experiences with racism, classism, or homophobia, for example, can be painful. But in confronting the power, privilege, and oppression that grow from social identity, those who seek a better world are called to do their own personal change work.

Circles seek to be a container for doing this challenging personal work. Circles bring people together in a community setting, where all are invited to explore and to struggle together—not one helping another, but with each person seeking their own growth and healing as well as growth and healing for the whole. For as Australian Aboriginal artist Lilla Watson said at the 1985 UN Decade for Women Conference in Nairobi, "If you have come to help me, I don't want your help. But if you come because your liberation is tied to mine, come let us work together."⁹

The work of healing divisions has been a challenge for the Circles, but through the work of the first two rounds of Circles, participants and facilitators have identified the four following grounding realities on which to base further work.

Circle participants are called to balance recognition of a common humanity with an acknowledgment of the influence of social identity and power imbalances. One of the evaluation participants described her social identity as human, but also said she claimed political identities based on her race, gender, sexual orientation, class, age, and physical ability. Although our humanness unites us, varying webs of identities that we claim, or are attributed to us, shape our life experiences, and those webs create a power differential that divides us from each other. The damage of these divisions calls out for a healing that recognizes both our humanness and our political identities, and people working in this area are seeking new models that weave together these realities.



In a report from the 2001 Bay Area Circle, for example, a participant who works as a diversity/anti-oppression trainer described her shifting practice. She talked about how she used to do the work from an angry, lashing-out place. She wanted to hit people over the head and make them get it. Now she feels we need a more compassionate way to be with each other in this work. Her understanding has evolved through a spiritual awakening as well as through many one-on-one conversations with people wanting to do the work in a different way. She thinks we need to continue to have a political analysis because it is a reality in our society, but that we need to shift the paradigm. Part of that shift is creating a sacred space in which healing can take place. Sharing stories helps to build the trust necessary for healing to occur. She feels that the work has been unsatisfying for so many years because people haven't been given the space to heal.

Even as healing divisions exists as the vision, there is a recognition that there will always be conflict. Neither individuals, Circles, nor social transformation will eliminate all sources of conflict. Conflict between people arises from many sources, including differing personal needs, opinions about political strategy, or core values, to name a few examples. Exploring these conflicts in an atmosphere of support and community can actually be a source of great learning. In a Bay Area Circle, an examination of shared values led to the realization that there will

HEALING DIVISIONS PROFILE:

Nina Laboy & Bill Aal
Circle co-facilitators

Nina: "The first Circle was a learning experience for me. It was like: 'That is cool; they are OK,' because I had never had the opportunity to have relationships with two white men (in) such depth."

Bill: "When in diverse groups, I watch those parts in me as a white man that tend to take up lots of talking space. I work with my white brothers to shift this dynamic."



always be conflict, disagreements, and confusion as part of such processes. Rather than seeing this a problem, the group accepted it as a reality and further explored what supports were needed to work through conflict. They identified a need for a means of communication that allowed for conflict, but that supported dialogue, was nonconfrontational, invited compassion, and was free of the idea of an enemy against whom we must fight.

In other Circles, the awareness of spirit became the support that helped to create an atmosphere in which conflict could exist productively. In the 2002 Philadelphia women's group, two Jewish women were supported by the group to explore their differences on the situation in Palestine in an emotional exchange. Some in the group felt it was a moment when spirit was most strongly present in their group. In a final Circle evaluation one of their fellow participants wrote:

I felt that the group was grounded in spirit the most when discussions reached the most challenging point, i.e., when people's "buttons" were pushed; or when people were voicing dissent. When people were struggling, but who still chose to stay in the process and not abandon it, is the point at which I feel that the group was most grounded in spirit ... that it could hold the pain and struggle, as well as the joy and laughter.

These moments of connection in the face of difference show that the work of healing divisions is possible.

An individual cannot heal divisions with others unless she is also working to heal divisions within herself. All people have internal work to do, whether they experience being a target of societal prejudice and discrimination, confusion or guilt about unearned privilege, or the human realities of pain and loss. As the individual does this internal work, her self-understanding increases, as does her understanding of how societal norms impact her and her relationships with others. This increased self-understanding can result in an infinite amount of changes. Circle participants have talked about such aspects as release of anger, increased confidence, and an orientation toward compassion.

Finding tools and supports for doing this healing work is a foundational piece of connecting across difference and doing the work of societal transformation. We must seek to change ourselves if we wish to change the world. A 2002 Seattle Circle participant eloquently stated, “The more I come into my own power, the easier it is to forgive.” As the Circles are structured now, participants need to enter the Circle already having begun this work. Circle activities and the sense of community experienced can further each individual’s work, but neither will it end with the Circle. Until societal prejudice, discrimination, and unearned privilege are eliminated, individual transformation will be a lifelong process.

The healing work of the Circles is best supported by participants’ willingness to work on both internal conflicts and the conflicts in the wider world. This willingness can be translated into practice with behaviors and activities, including:

- **Sharing stories.** In the context of a Circle, this calls all participants to share in a reciprocal way. A 2001 Boston participant described this successfully modeled in her Circle: “People aren’t always aware of what it is to be a person of a different background ... and sometimes you feel the person you are talking to doesn’t care, but with this group you really had the sense that if I share something I will get something out of the sharing. And not only that, but that person is going to share with me.”
- **Speaking honestly.** The work of healing calls forth honest opinion and feelings, and Circle facilitators need to work intentionally to support honest speech on a full range of issues. A 2001 Cape Cod participant described the honesty of her Circle: “I remember that we were able to disagree and get into arguments. The Circle was a container that could hold that. We could be passionate. And (we) didn’t have to be super nice and it felt all right.”
- **Listening without judgment and without a goal.** So often internal voices are jabbering in our head as we listen to others or we would like to jump to offer a solution. The work of healing, however, requires careful witness and is beyond quick solutions. Circles invite participants to practice listening, to structure activities and exercises that support deep, intentional listening. In response to a question about what activities helped explore divisions, a 2002 Louisville participant said, “The active listening piece, which asked what the most challenging moment of your life was. That was a really good training exercise for learning how to really hear each other in the group.”
- **Responding to people’s needs.** People’s unattended needs create unnecessary conflict. The Circles worked hard to meet a variety of needs. In a powerful example from the Seattle Circle, a participant in a wheelchair described what inspired her to join the Circle: “Lots of folks invite me places and I always appreciate it, but rarely do they say, “And we will make a ramp for you and we have thought about if you need to go to the bathroom.” I mean, these seem like small things, but they are not actually small things. There is considerable time and thought and effort and love that go into deciding that you want someone present... There were a lot of complex people with many different needs in the circle, but mine were fairly obvious and so you know that is part of what drew me, because if they want to be with me that much I want to be with them, too.”



READER REFLECTION

HAVE YOU EVER BEEN PART OF A GROUP THAT ACKNOWLEDGED AND EXPLORED ITS DIFFERENCES IN PRODUCTIVE WAYS? WHAT DID THE GROUP DO? WHAT MADE THE ACKNOWLEDGEMENT AND EXPLORATION POSSIBLE?

- **Examining the perceptions you hold of those who are different from you.** This work calls us to examine the beliefs and perceptions that are often formed about people who are different from us. As these beliefs and perceptions are surfaced and examined, we can decide how well they are serving the work of social transformation. In regard to race, for example, the Circles helped a white woman to strengthen her moment-to-moment awareness of situations in regards to race while a woman of color described how her consciousness of white people as the enemy shifted during her participation in Circles.
- **Being willing to be uncomfortable.** As Spirit in Action friend and training advisor George Lakey says, “Our culture emphasizes comfort. It is counter-cultural to encourage discomfort.” At workshops he offers through Training for Change, he draws concentric circles to help participants monitor their comfort levels during the workshop. The center circle represents comfort, the middle circle discomfort, and the outer Circle panic. He offers that learning happens in the discomfort realm as old patterns and beliefs are shaken up. A trainer or facilitator’s job is to foster experiences that create discomfort while maintaining enough support so that participants are not moved into panic. Circles seek to create this balance in their structure and invite participants to welcome rather than fear discomfort.

Supports That Facilitated the Work of Healing Divisions

SUPPORT	SPECIFICS TO THIS AREA
Intention	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ To form Circles that are diverse in terms of social identity, spirit perspective, and political work.■ To set diversity goals as part of Circle formation.■ To create Circles that are nurturing environments for all participants.
Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Multiracial teams led the 2002 Circles.■ There is a recruitment process (tasks, time, tips, application, etc.) that can be modified to fit the needs of particular areas.■ Circles developed guidelines that supported a feeling of safety and trust.■ The curriculum included some activities to be used to address divisions, and facilitators were flexible in meeting needs surfaced by these activities.
Leadership/ Facilitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Multiracial teams modeled collaboration across difference.■ When facilitators model openness and vulnerability, it allows participants to do the same.■ When facilitators have done personal work on healing divisions, they can model this work and share its challenges and rewards.■ When facilitators were able to create an atmosphere in which it was OK to have disagreements, honesty and trust grew in the group.
Activities	Facilitators and Evaluation Committee members identified the need to develop more activities to address the work of healing divisions. Storytelling was identified very strongly as a support for community building, and structuring more stories on the topic of healing divisions is needed. In a couple of Circles, theater techniques were used powerfully as a way to present, process, and heal the wounds of oppression felt by participants. These tools will be available in the Circles of Change Curriculum Guide. For more information, visit www.spiritinaction.net .

Barriers to Healing Divisions

BARRIER	DESCRIPTION/EXAMPLES	WAYS TO WORK WITH BARRIERS
Not acknowledged or used fully	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Although there were diverse people in the room, some Circles did not explore how that diversity impacted how they were together. ■ There was such an emphasis on one aspect of difference (race) that others were not explored in depth (age, for example). 	Have simple tools that can be used early on to create awareness of diversity.
Preconceived ideas about what diversity or healing work are	<p>Internal voices might say:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ “I’m not a good enough ally and this will be exposed.” ■ “Healing work is selfish. There is a world that needs to be saved.” 	Develop a new language to talk about this work (as Spirit in Action is trying to do by linking individual and group healing).
Bad experiences with diversity training in the past	Do not see diversity work as nurturing, but rather as stressful.	Reframe diversity work as self-care for the individual and for the group as a whole.
Activist culture	Focuses attention on making change in the external world and discounts internal and small-group change.	Connect the work done on healing the wounds of oppression to activists’ increased ability to function in diverse community and build the coalitions needed for powerful change.

Action

Action for deep and lasting change exists along a continuum that includes mass demonstrations as well as supporting the psychological, physical, and spiritual health of activists. Circles serve as a space for doing the less dramatic forms of activism—such as self-care, trust and relationship building, and the examination of strategy and development of new change tools—that will sustain those working for change for the long haul.



strategy • dialogue • trust • self-care

There is a continuum of action, and it flows not from lesser to greater, but rather in repeating cycles that require work on levels from the personal to the group, and outward to the wider society and its institutions.

As a Circle participant from Louisville said when responding to a question about how Circle participation impacted him,

I understood how many types of action there are, from very personal, one-on-one, to individual acts, to community organizing, and mass demonstrations. I understood that action takes place on so many levels all the time. We also need to recognize opportunities to raise someone's consciousness. Whether it is action for change in a police, government, or church institution, just seeing the wide diversity of tactics and actions one can take is important.

Spirit in Action embraces an understanding of action that includes a spectrum of personal, group, and societal approaches. As the current approaches to social change activism emphasize the societal or systemic actions for change, the Circles of Change's focus is on the foundational aspects of action that receive less attention: personal development work, relationship building, and dialogue on vision, strategy, and tactics. By focusing on these areas, Spirit in Action is not proposing that these types of action are more important, but rather is working to correct an imbalance in where attention is placed in the field of social activism. Through listening to the voices of Circles of Change participants, we can develop a fuller understanding of how Circles work seeks to support deep and powerful action for social change.

The type of action that Circles seek to support is grounded in developing a relationship with the self. In other words, activists are supported to engage in the inner psychological and spiritual work

ACTION

sustainability • collaborative relationships • mobilization

that leads to health and wholeness. The very term activist calls those concerned with justice to focus on external actions and the outer world. At its extreme end, this focus forces activists into a constant cycle of work, with no time for reflection or individual development. Much of their work brings activists into contact with the suffering of other people, animals, and the Earth as a whole. Activists' focus on "getting the work done" allows little time for grieving or needed spiritual, physical, and emotional renewal.

Creating a space for grappling with the pain that comes with activist work has been missing from social change work. In a report from the San Francisco pilot Circles, a mapping of the intersection of spirit and movement-building work yielded this comment from a participant: "Self-care has been missing from social change movements and communities. Burnout is everywhere. It isn't just the physical lack of self-care that causes burnout, though; it stems also from the fact that so many movements are isolated and intense." Over and over again, Circle of Change participants spoke about the need for self-care. One Louisville participant said,

You have to take care of you. To know that in this work if you are not able to take care of yourself, how can you be effective and help others? If I am ignoring myself I know that I will not be effective. If you don't take care of yourself then how are you going to keep moving? You can for so long, but then you may explode or get overwhelmed and back away from what you are doing.

Circles create an opening and a process for activists to support each other to prevent burnout and move toward health and wholeness.

While healing and self-care came to be an appreciated part of the Circles, a number of Circle participants noted a difference between the work of Circles and personal therapeutic work. A report from a Berkeley Circle session offered this thought: "This isn't about therapy. (It's) not about being cured, but about getting to more questions." Other Circle participants have pointed out that people also need to be doing their personal work outside of the Circle in order to work on deeper issues.

Along with addressing healing and self-care, the Circles provided a respite from the frenzy of action, which allowed participants to reflect more deeply on their personal values and how they lived these values in the world. This reflection encouraged new ways of understanding action. A Bay Area participant spoke of a deeper understanding of the connection between action and spirit by saying, "I have developed a whole new attitude and concept of what action is, and now for me it is about how I move through the world on a day-to-day basis and how I interact with people everywhere." Other participants did not use the language of spirituality, but talked of a deepening ability to be more fully themselves, including this man from Seattle: "The more authentic I was, the more OK I was in the room." Developing the inner strength and authenticity to engage with those of different values, backgrounds, or beliefs is a foundation for the collaborative action needed for broad-based change.

The foundation of effective action is supportive and collaborative relationships with others.

"Without a sense of community there is no real movement towards progressive social change" is how one Bay Area Circle concluded its discussion on the intersection between community building and movement building. This group of younger activists, a number of whom came from international backgrounds, felt discouraged about the possibility of movement building, and some expressed disillusionment as to how this work has been done in the past. Community building, however, was connected to feelings of hope about the positive social change. This hope motivated the desire to build community.

Participation in Circles offers an opportunity to build that community as well as a container for a quicker deepening of relationships than might come from a more goal-oriented gathering. A Bay Area participant spoke to the importance of relationship building as an action outcome of the Circles:

The biggest action has been building collaborative relationships with other activists, building ongoing strong work relationships, and finding myself connected to a larger community of activists that in all my years of work I did not have as fully as I do now. That is a really vital piece of the action work that has come out of

CIRCLES IN ACTION

Darnell Johnson
Fairness Campaign,
Circle facilitator

"I think through some of the things I have done with Spirit in Action we get things done and move to action even stronger. Our work becomes more intentional, stronger, focused, and real."



direct work with Circles and really valuing and building collaborations and expanding when, where, and how I do activist work with others. That, I feel, is a big piece of direct action of working and being in the Circle."

Circles create a space for dialogue on issues of great importance to those working, sometimes in different ways, for a better world. This dialogue builds trust, which is essential for sustained action outside of the Circles.

Through the storytelling and experiential activities that are at the heart of the Circles, participants began a dialogue on the variety of change strategies and how they can be applied and connected. While Circle participants share a common set of values and carry a similar desire for a peaceful, just, and sustainable world, their strategies on how to live their values and achieve their desires often differ due to their backgrounds. The source of conflict for passionate and committed activists most often centers on the use of particular strategies and tactics. The relationships developed in Circles, however, allow for a greater ability to listen to activists from diverse perspectives. The depth of people's stories shared in Circles allows for a greater understanding of why certain positions are taken and certain strategies selected. Some participants see mass action and rallies as most important, while others wonder about the long-term impact of this kind of action and value more relationship-oriented organizing. Other participants wonder how to develop a nonviolent plan of action in the face of the violence so many experience from our current system.

Trust builds in a Circle, and as a Louisville participant shared, "Once you build a certain amount of trust, action is easy. If someone says, 'Hey, I'm doing x, y, or z,' being on the level of trust with the people in our group allows you to believe them ... It would be really cool if, in a larger world, we set out to build those types of relationships with people, because I think that is what makes action better. If you trust you can believe others."

To be counted as effective Circle participants must share what they learn in the Circle outside of the Circle. Over and over again, participants pointed to how they had taken what they learned from the Circle and applied it to different areas of their life. As detailed in more depth

in the Impacts section of this report, Circle facilitators and participants bring new tools to improve decision making in their activist groups, transform the behavior of at-risk youth, introduce a language of social change that includes words such as love, and inspire educators to believe positive change is possible in their schools. The external action of Circles to date springs from their ability to ripple their approaches and tools to the other circles of participants' lives. A Louisville participant, in fact, cautioned against considering being in the Circles an action, saying, "I fear that sitting in these groups may feel so good to everyone that they may think that 'This is my justice work,' but it isn't." The work of the Circle supports one end of the action spectrum and hopes to improve the quality and quantity of action in the external world.

This Louisville participant also acknowledged the challenges of bringing Circles approaches to the wider world: "Trying stuff we have done in Spirit in Action outside in other contexts is pretty much out of most people's experience. It's not that I think that we will never get there, but I don't think people are sure what that process can do for them." The contribution that Spirit in Action wishes to make through this report and the ongoing work of Circles is to demonstrate that a Circle approach facilitates and strengthens the whole spectrum of action needed for social and political transformation.

Supports That Facilitated the Work of Action

TOPIC	SPECIFICS TO THIS AREA
Intention of Circle Curriculum Guide	Naming action and movement building as crucial elements supports awareness of action as goal of the Circle program.
Creation of community and trust to serve as a foundation for action in the world external to Circles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Circle participation breaks the isolation felt by those working for social change and transformation. ■ Circle participants develop trust with one another that can aid them to act collectively or to network with other participants and their organizations.
Opportunity to explore the range of strategies open to social change activists	As participants talk and share stories about how they have developed their views on how to make change, their understanding of the full range of action open to them as change makers expands.
Leadership/Facilitation	Circle facilitators appreciated and supported the full spectrum of activism, from personal development to organizing for systemic change. They had engaged in, either currently or formerly, the whole range of action as defined by Circles. During Circle sessions, they were able to support the less common activities of reflection and dialogue.
Activities	Storytelling, discussions on the importance of self-care, and individual reflection time that is brought back to the group for sharing support Circle's work on Action. These tools will be more fully developed and described in the Circles of Change Curriculum Guide. For more information, visit www.spiritinaction.net .

Barriers to Action

BARRIER	DESCRIPTION/EXAMPLES	WAYS TO WORK WITH BARRIERS
Intention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ It was unclear to participants how a group from disparate backgrounds, many of whom were already engaged in action for social change, might create mechanisms for working together. ■ There were different needs around taking action, depending on Circle participants' levels of activist experience or current engagement. For example, a West Coast Circle facilitator expressed a need for her Circle members to practice taking action together while a group of more experienced activists currently employed by social change organizations felt some of the activities were too elementary for them. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Clarify intention of Circles as a space for the foundational aspects of activism and a place of support and feedback for participants as they experiment with taking Circle approaches outside of the Circle. ■ Create flexibility in the curriculum so that it can be shifted to meet the needs of activists at various levels.



Circle Impacts



To evaluate the impact of the Circles model, which blended spirit, vision, healing divisions, and action into its curriculum, the Evaluation and Report Committee broke their examination into four strands:

- Individual change
- Building of Circle community
- Sharing of Circle tools and approaches beyond the Circle
- Contributions to progressive movement building

The impacts as identified and articulated by the committee present a rich picture of how these strands interconnect and reinforce one another. The strand relating to changes at the individual level, for example, connects to the development of community within the Circle. Shifts in individuals and community building exist in simultaneous supporting realities. These two levels are thus examined together. These connected impacts at the personal and community development level then serve as the foundation for Circle participants' and facilitators' action in the world beyond Circles. These actions, which included sharing of Circle tools, language, and approaches as well as organizing new and different circles, are inspirations for further movement building work.

In reflecting on her experience, one participant described the sense of community and the belief that they could create a better world as a promise—which she saw not as a fully-grown lotus flower, but as a bud in the middle of the pond. “Which, at least,” she concluded, “is a little more than I had seen before.” This image of

IMPACTS



the bud is an apt one to describe the Circles support for building a movement, which is at the heart of Spirit in Action's purpose and work.

Individual Change and Circle Community Development

Participants from a range of backgrounds and geographic areas encountered an atmosphere in Circles of Change that supported change on the individual level. These internal or interpersonal changes included a lessening of isolation, a change in their concept, a shift in personal beliefs, and a change, often a deepening, in their understanding or practice of spirit. Because the Circles were originally conceptualized as time-limited training programs or think tank groups, the depth of individual change, as well as strength of community formed, in Circles were unintended outcomes. Circle participants hungered for an experience that deeply engaged their entire selves and allowed them to practice new ways of being, relating, and communicating. In their wisdom, participants and facilitators recognized that without changing themselves as activists, the deep transformation needed for society will not come to be.

Many people were first drawn to Circles of Change out of a deep desire to make connections between concepts not necessarily connected in activist circles or by the general public, particularly between spirit and action. Many participants from diverse backgrounds and areas spoke of how the Circles allowed them to experience these connections and break the sense of isolation they were feeling.

A few participants entered the Circles with clear internal beliefs about the connection between spirit and action. Niyonu Spann, an African American musician and trainer from Philadelphia, shared:

I feel like coming to this group coincided with the yearning in me, something that needed to be completed in my spirit. I've never seen a distinction between my spiritual life and my activism. In truth, I see no separation. In the world and feeling credible in one or the other, I recognize a difference.

*“... this was
awesome to
be able to be
my whole self.”*

Knowing that spirit and action are connected, Niyonu is compelled to bring them both into her life and work in the world, but many of the political activists she's worked with do not make these connections. Some discount openly expressed spirituality as a credible part of change work. When Niyonu has brought her spirit-center gifts of singing to activists, however, she knows it offers a needed inspiration to activists. “I felt this thirsty thing,” she said about the reaction to her leading of song on a bus to an antiwar rally.

Other participants entered the Circles with less confidence in their belief that spirit and action are inseparable. Unable to begin an exploration of spirit and action with others from either their activist or spirit communities, they felt a sense of isolation, often doubting the validity of their beliefs. Hamlet Mateo, an Afro-Caribbean Buddhist currently participating in his second Bay Area Circle, talked of feeling as if he had to choose between being an activist and being a spiritual person. Through the Circle experience, his thinking changed. He talked of a new understanding of how spirit and action are essential to each other:

Part of what Spirit in Action acknowledged was that if you have one but not the other, bad things can happen. If you have activism without spirituality, you can become arrogant and burnt out and aggressive. If you have spirituality without activism, you can become complacent and aloof. I think this was the first group that I encountered that was having this kind of conversation.

Hamlet offers a clear and compelling view of how spirit and action feed and strengthen one another. His experience was mirrored in other Circles across the country with participants from a wide variety of backgrounds. April



IMPACTS

Rosenblum, for instance, a young, Jewish anarchist involved in political prisoner support work and anti-racist education in Philadelphia, shared her thoughts on the most important aspect of the Circle to her:

I had waited for this for a long time, the combination of the two parts of me. I spend a lot of time in activist circles, where I feel comfortable but spirituality is pooh-poohed. When I go into Circles where people are open about spirituality, I can get along OK if I just talk about the nice things, but not politics. So this was awesome to be able to be my whole self.

When the passions of spirit and action are compartmentalized into different parts of a person's life, she cannot fully express herself in either area. This prevents her from bringing new insights into these different areas of her life. In Circles, however, people are encouraged to offer the full and complex range of their beliefs, questions, doubts, and inspirations. Through this dialogue, Circle participants make meaningful connection between formerly segregated aspects of themselves as well as with others excited to explore the same territory. They become mirrors of wholeness to each other.

As people's sense of isolation dissipated, it was replaced with strong relationships, a sense of bonding, and connectedness between individuals. Nina Laboy, a Puerto Rican participant who currently co-facilitates a new Circle in Seattle, spoke about the importance of the relationships built in the Circle:

I personally never had the experience of building relationships with so many people at one time. Most of my deep relationships were with my family, not with other people. And that became very important for me. It turned out to be an aspect of what I needed to strengthen my social action work. That was what was missing before.

Nina's comments point to a lack of relationships in her work with fellow activists. Strong relationships, such as those that exist for many with their families, do not necessarily translate into the activist sphere, which often channels participants' energy into reaching a goal. But such relationships, as Nina points out, strengthen social action work. They create a foundation for the cooperation

and collaboration required by the building of a broad-based movement for social and political transformation. While Nina uses the language of relationship building, Meck Groot, a white woman who participated in a 2001 Boston Circle, uses the language of heart and intimacy to describe her Circle connections:

Meeting people was one of the most important aspects of the Circle to me. I made some connections to people ... I don't stay in touch with any of them on any regular basis, but I see people here and there. I feel this heart connection. There was a kind of an intimate bonding that takes place in the Circle that lasts.

The connections forged in Circles are of such a depth for many that they transcend the end of the Circle. Participants leave with a set of relationships that can be picked up at any moment. These relationships have an intrinsic value of their own, feeding the energy and spirits of those who experience them and serving as a reserve of resources for future change efforts.

Ultimately a strong sense of community developed between Circle participants. For many this sense of community was a unique experience. Nick Reese, a young, white participant from Louisville, Kentucky, described the importance of the Circle to him by saying:

A sense of community is always important. That was probably the biggest thing I got from the Circle: the creating of a community of people that I am really emotionally involved with. Also, it was the first community I have been in.

At the start of Circles, Spirit in Action staff and Circle facilitators believed that a goal of the Circles was to reawaken people to a sense of community that they had forgotten or lost. As the first round of Circles progressed, Cape Cod facilitator Betty Burkes realized that many in her Circle had never experienced a sense of community. Like Nick, their first experience of community came from the Circle, in which members themselves shape and nurture the culture and purpose of their group through rich and authentic sharing.

The Circle's emphasis on community building runs counter to mainstream U.S. culture, which places a high value on individualism.

Both the uniqueness of this approach and its positive benefits were noted by Mainus Sultan, an Amherst Circle participant originally from Bangladesh, in his reflections on a Circle storytelling activity, Journey Maps, in which people draw and then talk about the paths their lives have taken:

It was an unusual circumstance for American culture. I don't remember all my fellow participants' names, but I do remember their stories. Things were emerging in a very coherent way. For example, someone I knew well revealed things about himself that I did not know. It showed how little we know about people we meet on a day-to-day basis.

As people hear each other's stories, they come to understand in deeper and deeper ways their common values and desires despite their diverse backgrounds. Patricia Rojas Zambrano, a native of Colombia, who co-facilitated a 2002 Bay Area Circle and currently participates in an ongoing Circle, described the values of Circles this way:

It was very important for me to feel that it was possible to be part of a community of like-minded people who are interested in exploring or learning different ways to communicate, relate, and interact with each other to bring about the change we want to see in the world. It was really important for me to see that I was not isolated.

Patricia speaks to a common theme of breaking the isolation she was feeling, and also names an underlying piece of Circles work: learning and practicing new ways of communicating and being. Like Patricia, many participants have a picture of how they would like to be in the world. They would like to communicate with compassion, work collaboratively, nurture themselves and others, or be lead by spirit. Their interaction with the wider culture, however, becomes more of an obstacle than a support to practicing new behaviors. In the Circles, a community of like-minded people provides a laboratory for building new ways of being together and being in the world.

“Meeting people was one of the most important aspects of the Circle to me.”

Practice and support are foundational elements for personal or systems change in a larger environment. As the Circles supported this growth, a number of Circle participants identified how their self-concept changed and their beliefs and practices shifted.

“Confidence” was a word used by a number of participants from varied backgrounds to describe their internal shifts. Some felt new confidence in their lives as a whole, while others noted changes specifically related to their work as activists. The words of Tanisha Johnson, a young African American activist from Louisville, illustrate both kinds of change.

Tanisha spoke about feeling closed and carrying shame or guilt. She said, “I always have to be that strong black woman who can carry everything. I never have a burden, or if I do, I just get it done and keep going, even though I am crumbling inside.” She was moved by the way Circle members opened up their homes to each other as meeting places for the Circle. “It was symbolic of me being able to open up and see people giving freely. I was able to break down and trust with the group.”

Tanisha praised the Circle for “just giving me the opportunity to be real. I thought my tear ducts were dry. Being in Spirit in Action has helped me release.”

When asked how her view of herself as an activist had changed since participating in the Circles, Tanisha said:

Well, I think it is important to step up and take reins. For me, it is just being more confident and being out there. We have these tools and we have a great energy. We need to move forward. In community, in work, in family, in relationships. I can't say how successful it will be, but being out there and having that energy and being open helps.

She spoke about her desire to gain more tools and her need to continue to draw on systems of support for bringing spirit-inspired tools into activist Circles. She said, “I know you have to be careful even when you mention spirit. Some are turned off by the word ‘spirit’ and taking it to church. I think poor little spirit has a bad reputation.”

Despite these barriers, Tanisha made it clear that she had taken both specific tools and the essence of Circle work into many areas of her life. She referred to visioning her future life as she looked forward to turning 30, bringing community-building questions to her Buddhist group, and taking more risks to confront and work with conflict between members of an activist board on which she served.

A number of Circle participants have struggled with spirit’s “bad reputation” in their activist work. Their desire to bring spirit into activist work has been thwarted by others’ perceptions and their own internal doubts. After going through Circles, a number of them spoke of feeling a new and stronger identity as an activist. For example, Sarah Halley, a white woman from Philadelphia who uses theater as a social change tool, shared:

I feel like Spirit in Action has legitimized me as an activist. Activist circles can be very exclusionary. Your inclusiveness has allowed me to be more “with” instead of outside the group. Spirit in Action can give people a sense that what they are doing is part of a larger thing. That’s the big M (movement) that we are all working together.

In Massachusetts, Wilderness Sarchild, a white Circle participant from the 2001 pilot round who has for many years worked to bring spirit into her activist life, said that the Circle “gave me more confidence and affirmation that spirit and action do go together. That has not usually been encouraged in political groups I’ve been part of.” The Circles’ acceptance and weaving together of spirit and activism became a mirror in which some participants could gain a new and greater view of themselves as contributors in activist contexts.

This web of community, practice, and changing self-concepts created the support for Circle participants to shift their beliefs and practices inside and outside the Circle. These beliefs and practices related to different areas of people’s lives, including their spirit work and their perceptions of people from different social identities, particularly in regard to race.

The ways in which specific spirit practices were shared, and the amount of sharing, varied from Circle to Circle. In the Bay Area and the 2002 Philadelphia Women’s group, for example, there was a great deal of sharing of specific spiritual practices of participants. In one Bay Area circle, Amy Penkin, a younger white woman, talked about how she had at first been nervous about sharing a ritual from her Wiccan practice, but the group’s positive response inspired her:



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Identifying as a witch is something that is viewed as very scary and negative. People have all these assumptions that it is very cult-like and Satanic. That is not what it is! It is an Earth-based practice. For my ritual to be received so well was very inspiring for me. I want people to share that more. For me that was a good experience.

In another Bay Area Circle, Karen Hutchinson, a participant in the ongoing pilot Circle and co-facilitator of 2002 and 2003 Circles, talked of how hearing about fellow members' spiritual practices impacted her: "Sharing your spiritual beliefs—that I had never been exposed to before—has been so rich, such a gift. That awareness has shifted my focus in ways I never could have anticipated. It really has shifted the spirit in the group, too." Sharing of spiritual practices created a mutual exchange, in which the giver grew in confidence about sharing her practice and the receiver increased her awareness of spirit perspectives. This exchange also lifts the Circle groups as a whole to a new level of connection.

In the Philadelphia women's Circle, the members' sharing of gifts from their spiritual life developed into a Circle culture with specific practices. They had an intentional opening to each Circle, prayed before each meal, and infused their meetings with song. In reflecting on the Circle, the facilitator, Pamela Freeman, an African American woman who primarily has a meditation practice, spoke of how she was opening more and more to ritual, while Merle Berman, a Jewish ecofeminist, spoke of the practice of music: "Chanting really brought me home. I remember thinking, 'I wish I did this every morning.' And I remember when we started our group this way thinking that this is how I like to spend time with people." These examples from women of different backgrounds show the possibility and the power of sharing and learning across difference.

Taking a slightly different approach to the creation of shared spirit practice, the Louisville Circle, composed entirely of members who self-identified as queer, struggled with some of the religious symbols of their backgrounds and worked to reframe these symbols. Tanisha shared:

When I typically thought of spirit I thought of my Southern Baptist upbringing of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. The religious idea of spirit changed and I realized that spirit is what you make of it. . . . I have been able to take the religious context off of spirit so even when we had an altar, I was not thinking of it as religious. It was more like an intentional space we put energy toward.

During a visit with Spirit in Action staff, Adam Cicily Schneider spoke of how the group's struggles with the altar and its implications allowed him to explore his own feelings around the negative aspects of religion and gain appreciation for his upbringing as a Catholic. This is an example of the kind of healing work that is possible through Circles participation. Taking the risk to share, reciprocal exchange, reframing, and healing thus serve as key elements of the Circle's spirit work and often result in participants deepening their own relationship with spirit.

A number of participants spoke of how their experience of being in a diverse Circle had an impact on their understanding of, and relationship with, people from different backgrounds. In the Philadelphia Women's Circle where discussions of difference were open and passionate, Jessie Cocks spoke of the impact on her as a white woman:

We had moments where we came across racism and concepts and misconceptions. It's not always easy, as a white woman with a lot of rank and privilege. And by rank I mean that power, either realized or potential, that anyone can have relative to another individual or group. The higher your rank, the more privilege you have, and I have plenty as a white woman! There were times that felt very strong for me and reinforced my commitment to be more aware and clear, in the moment, to deal with anything that comes up as a flag, even if others in the room don't see it as a flag.

Some people of color spoke of how their perception of white people shifted. Bethsaida Ruiz, for example, a Latina who participates in the ongoing Bay Area pilot Circle and became a Circle co-facilitator in 2002, talked of how sharing stories and food in a multiracial group helped her "heal" her perception of "white people as the devil." Nina from Seattle spoke in detail about cross-race relationships formed in the Circle:

I also think that for me as a person of color, I would have to answer from my experience that there was internal anxiety and internal experiences that I went through in the circles that had to do with particularly race. . . . (Maybe) it wasn't turmoil, but it was dealing with people of other races and other perspectives. And it was a learning experience for me. It was like: "That is cool; they are OK." Because I had never had the opportunity to have relationships with two

**A Selected List
of Places Where
Circle Tools Have
Been Used:**

Solidaridad Colombia

Keepers of the Heart

Massachusetts
School Districts

(Amherst-Pelham,
Newton, Easthampton)

Moses Brown School

American Friends
Service Committee
Chapters

University of
Massachusetts
at Amherst

University of
California at Berkeley

Punahou School

Bay Area Teacher
Development
Collaboration

Soul Food for the
Student Activist
Retreat

COOL Conference

Hollyhock
Leadership Institute

DRISHTI: Center
for Integral Ecology

Clayoquot Sound
Rainforest Festival

St. Mary's Hospital

Louisville Youth Group

Kentucky
Fairness Campaign

Progressive
Communicators
Network

Changemakers: Making
Money Make Change

Turning Tide Coalition

white men (in) such depth.... I suspect that the other women of color felt the same way to a certain extent. The learning experience was in developing and having the relationships and the conversations and hearing where people were coming from, and you know, going through different perspectives that maybe I had no experience of. They are still a cool person, a person of spirit. They are still human beings.

Since her experience as a 2002 Circle participant, Nina has gone on to co-facilitate a new Circle with Circle facilitator and Tools for Change staff person Bill Aal, a white man. This relationship development across difference is seed of possibility for more alliances and coalition work across difference.

The experience of one participant in the Boston pilot Circle offers a model for Circle action based on personal alliances and support across difference. Yulin Ling describes herself as “human, having embraced the political identities of Chinese American; female; queer; working-class based, now middle class; artist/entrepreneur; 30s; and physically able.” Active in Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgendered (LGBT) politics, she moved to Boston after spending time traveling in Asia.

Yulin joined the Circle because “it felt like a good place to think a bit more about A) what my personal kind of process/ experiences were and B) also the larger context.” The personal alliances formed in the group created “gorgeous opportunities to talk about how our spiritual lives were integrated in our work.” These relationships gave Yulin concrete support when she started organizing to stop a lesbian bar from using the name Geishas. Others in her Circle quickly offered to help petition, protest, or boycott. Within three weeks, Yulin said, “I had a list of 20 organizations behind us. We were this coalition, and it wasn’t just other people of color, LGBT folks, but it was beyond that. It was really about social justice issues.”

After meeting with Yulin and feeling the pressure of community reaction, the owners of the bar agreed to change the name. Although her fellow participants did not share her unique identity as a Chinese American queer woman, the group as a whole experienced the energy and effectiveness of working across lines of difference. In a report at the time, facilitators identified connections as one of the most powerful aspects of the Circle, writing, “There were several peripheral impacts that (Yulin’s) organizing and the relationships created in Boston Circles of Change catalyzed. Connections were made that would not have been there if it were not for Circles of Change.”

Although Yulin lost touch with the people from the Boston Circle when she moved to New York City to be closer to her family, she believes that the Circles have the potential to support movement building. Yulin recommended that Spirit in Action give attention to sustainability and to supporting ongoing connections between participants.

It is interesting to note the language used in these discussions of diversity—moment-to-moment awareness, healing, and connectedness—and to see how they are mirror reflections of language used to describe the work of spirit. Meck Groot, who in addition to being a Boston Circle participant co-directs the Women’s Theological Center, makes a direct link between the work of spirit and the work of undoing racism:

When I think about anti-racism and the people I work with, the white people who are most willing to stay in and hang

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with the change that's required are people who are in spiritual community. They are already in spiritual community of one kind or another. They already know they are being held by something bigger.

The work of spirit and the work of healing divisions caused by racism (or any other "ism") are revealed as intimately linked in examining the impacts of the Circle. To move beyond the personal pain and wounding of racism, either from the perspective of being a targeted or a privileged person, requires work centered in spirit, including building community across difference, listening in deep ways, examining the past, and working toward a personal sense of healing. Having an awareness of spirit or a spirit practice calls forth the courage and provides the inner resources needed to take on this difficult, but pivotal, work that lies at the core of social and political transformation.

Action in the World Beyond Circles and Movement Building

This process of personal change and developing a community of support became a foundation for external actions by many Circle participants. Participants reported bringing tools experienced in the Circles into other areas of their lives, including in their workplaces, with their families, and in their activist or spiritual groups, mainly with positive results. Circles also took on and supported action in a number of ways, including supporting direct political actions of Circle members and forming other Circles.

One of the intended and desired outcomes of the Circles of Change Program was to introduce participants to tools that they could then take into other areas of their lives. This outcome was achieved solidly. In interviews and focus groups almost all participants and facilitators reported taking tools experienced in the Circles into other parts of their lives. In addition, 74 percent of online survey respondents reported using tools experienced in the Circle outside of the Circle. Of those respondents, 90 percent used tools in their personal lives, 50 percent used tools in their workplaces, 40 percent used tools in their religious/spiritual groups, and 30 percent in their activists groups.

Participants also described the impact of these tools as overwhelmingly positive. All survey respondents who used Circle tools in other contexts reported that the impact was positive, with 68 percent saying the results were very positive, the highest rating. In their comments on the benefits of using these tools, they described outcomes such as increased authenticity, greater connection with self and others as well as between areas such as spirit and activism, deepening relationships in the group, building group purpose, and developing trust.

In interviews, focus groups, and Circle reports, people spoke at greater length about the impacts of bringing Circle tools into other areas of their lives, offering statements such as:

- I didn't know that tool (of Appreciative Inquiry, which was introduced in the Circles). So then I used it in my job (at the American Friends Service Committee). We had a whole exercise with all my staff, where we all did Appreciative Inquiry you know, and it was a profound experience for everybody.
- I have used the (physical) movement exercise to get people to talk about what they have done. Right before break or after break I have asked, "What do your democratic rights mean to you?" That was really kind of fun. It made everyone laugh.
- With our Buddhist groups we ended up doing an exercise with a diverse group of people. We had Circles, and I asked them three questions: What is your name? What is something we don't know about you? What does peace look like to you? People really appreciated that. We don't always talk about stuff in the abstract and when you start visualizing it and thinking about it, it is more concrete and real and obtainable.
- I have just seen really direct results. People feeling more honored and appreciated. I think it is what we all do by inspiring people to volunteer their time. Really recognizing them as individuals, even if it is just that five minutes before the meeting, can make a huge difference.



Applying Circle Tools

Spirit in Action staff use Circle tools in support of their other program initiative, The Progressive Communicators Network (PCN). Since 2000, PCN has brought together media and public relations practitioners to increase the power and reach of grassroots voices in the media and in the formation of public policy and opinion. Using tools including community building, visioning, and awareness of how to work with the rich diversity of group members, PCN has grown from an informal group to an organized network with a strategic plan. What has the Progressive Communicators Network accomplished using Circle tools? Results identified by Network members include:

Relationship Building: PCN fosters the development of a group of peers who provide support and advice to each other in their work as progressive communicators.

Sharing Tools and Approaches: By sharing their tools, techniques, and a variety of approaches to doing media work, participants bring new strategies to a wider audience of PCN members' own organizations and clients.

Understanding the Field: PCN participants develop a deeper understanding of the progressive communications field as a whole. This helps them appreciate the need for a variety of strategies, understand their own work within a wider context, and know where to turn for help outside their area of expertise.

Overcoming Obstacles to Unity: PCN is working to break down boundaries, particularly those of age, race, geography, and approach to the work.

Ability to Work Collaboratively: As participants develop peer and personal relationships, cooperative and collaborative projects are being undertaken, including cross-training at each other's events and working on core messaging projects.

For more information about the Progressive Communicators Network visit www.spiritinaction.net.

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In addition to specific tools, some Circle participants spoke of the power of the overall Circle principles, approach, and language, and how these are entering into their lives. Megan Voorhees, a white woman who participated in the Bay Area pilot Circle and went on to lead a 2002 Circle, spoke of the importance of Circle language in bringing her experience into her workplace in a department of a private university that trains student leaders and activists: "It was hard to find language or an approach that feels comfortable. Now I am able to work with 19-year-old student activists and talk about spirit in a way that is not shutting doors but opening doors." Later, she described a specific example of introducing spirit-focused language into her workplace by saying:

We were in a group talking about what leadership programming should look like for students and I said, "We need to talk about love and create a safe place for talking about love," and (my boss) replied, "Well, then the ROTC students will not feel welcome." I said, "So not true." They long to feel connected and cared for too.

In a unique but powerful example, Bay Area Circle facilitators Bethsaida and Karen, who work together as a social worker and a psychiatric nurse respectively, brought a spirit-centered approach into their work at a hospital locked unit for at-risk youth. As Bethsaida explains, she did not anticipate that her Circle work would directly impact her work at the hospital:

Initially, I didn't really think about how I could use my Circle experience in my everyday work, but eventually I came to see that spirituality had a place there, too. The sheer level of violence in our unit was incredibly hard, and we began to think about whether there was some way that our Circle work could change things. We began by introducing a youth relaxation group at night, before bed.... The impact of our meditation practices has been astonishing. The kids participate eagerly, asking questions and soaking up the chance to focus on their inner selves.

They are hungry for this opportunity.... This work has literally transformed many of them. They come into the unit thinking that they have no power, and they leave realizing that they can make changes in their lives and affect the world as well.

Karen expressed similar feelings, adding, “the Circles have changed my work from being ‘just a job.’ By making connections between spirituality and heart and social change, I have integrated social change into everything I do.” Introducing spirit-centered work into the unit also has had concrete, positive impacts on the youth who participate. Before the introduction of a circle session in the evening, getting the young people to bed was a long and difficult task that could involve physical restraints and medication. Since the sessions were instituted, however, many participants go straight to bed and require less medication.


Those Circle participants who are taking the integration of spirit and action to the wider world are demonstrating a new kind of leadership. They are able to reach and work with diverse people, increase the effectiveness of their work in many different societal systems, and build a community of support that sustains each member for the long term. This kind of leadership is needed not only in the movement to integrate a spirit perspective into change work, but also within the existing field of progressive political change work.

While Circle participants shared tools outside of the Circle after only a brief introduction, taking tools into the most public contexts, particularly activist organizations, was more of a challenge. Those who served as Circle facilitators were best able to translate tools into these contexts, which is a logical outcome of their higher level of training and support. Facilitators received in-depth training, connected with and learned from a national group of peers, received support and feedback from Spirit in Action, and tested their facilitation skills using a still-experimental curriculum. This gave them the confidence to apply their tools in other areas such as the hospital and higher education examples described above. Additionally, Phyllis Labanowski, who was a pilot Circle participant and trained as a facilitator in Massachusetts, described how she now brings spirit into the social justice and diversity work she does in mainstream secondary schools, resulting in teachers and educators working to change their schools with increased energy and effectiveness. Darcy Riddell, a native of Canada who co-facilitated a Bay Area Circle, has reported on leading an opening activity with a spirit perspective for an environmental conference, and has continued to lead workshops on the connection between spirituality and activism. She noted that leading the Circles has given her the confidence to do this work. While this ability to use tools in many contexts represents the experiences of the majority of facilitators, two facilitators contacted as part of the evaluation process reported that they did not feel fully prepared for all that running a Circle entailed, and encouraged Spirit in Action to strengthen the training for facilitators.

During the evaluation process, a number of facilitators were asked to reflect on the longer-term impact on their work, and mentioned the following:

- Serving as a Circle for Change facilitator has been an eye-opening, challenging, growing, and rewarding experience. This was my first role in playing the facilitator and I acquired a stronger grounding in the practice of facilitation and mediation.
- It gave me a great opportunity to build across different networks. Offered a reason and a purpose to bringing people together across networks in a substantial and authentic way.
- It reaffirmed the power of facilitating in a group. We tried a really different thing and there was power in it.
- It helps me to pull together my various missions of helping activists be more mindful in the work they do and connecting the personal with the political to be more effective in the work.

“By making connections between spirituality and heart and social change, I have integrated social change into everything I do.”



Building skills and networks to serve the development of personal missions and collective needs are some of the most potent impacts of this approach to leadership development. As this piece of the web is built, a foundation is created for a movement with the potential for creating social transformation.

As a result of the leadership skills they developed, some facilitators have gone on to organize Circles with minimal or no support from Spirit in Action. Toni Lester, for example, who assisted with the Boston 2002 Circle, has developed and run a weekend retreat for people in leadership roles relating to race and racism. In spring 2003, five participants from the Boston area met to reflect on how spirit intersected with their own social justice work. They gathered insights and received tools on how reflection and centering skills could help them be more effective. Toni organized the workshop in part to experiment with a different, shorter duration of the Circle. While the content worked well in the weekend framework, it was still a challenge to get busy activists to commit and then follow through on coming to the weekend.

In another example, Sarah Kurien, a facilitator and college student, followed up her Circles of Change experience by leading a six-session circle for Berkeley students, who were diverse in terms of area of study, race, gender, and sexuality. Using what she had learned from being a facilitator, Sarah led the group in such Circle activities as object sharing, altar making, Spirit in Action Journey Mapping, and opening and closing rituals. Each Circle included a potluck dinner. In a recent reflection on what was special about this Circle, Sarah wrote:

Most people had never experienced anything similar to this kind of sharing. We used the sharing-based model of learning to foster appreciation for one another and the experiences that each individual brought forth. This was the most special aspect for me. This group of people grew to trust each other in such profound ways. We discussed and often debated various controversial issues as we searched for deeper understanding from all different perspectives. Many had never engaged in these kinds of discussions, and almost none of them had ever done so in such a diverse circle. Conflict was engendered, yet the group grew from these moments of hostility to become closer, more open, and tolerant. The individual and collective progress was nothing short of phenomenal.

The Seattle and Boston organizations, with which Spirit in Action partnered to run Circles, Tools for Change, and No Ordinary Time, have continued to run Circles and have drawn deeply from the Circle models and tools. As described above, Bill Aal, original co-facilitator of the 2002 Seattle Circle, and Nina Laboy, a Circle participant, have become the facilitation team for a new Tools for Change Circle. In Boston, Spirit in Action cosponsored No Ordinary Time's Peace and Justice Leaders Project. Through the project, No Ordinary Time trains, nurtures, and connects a local multiracial, cross-class group of leaders committed to an integration of social justice and reflective/spiritual practice in the greater Boston area. The first session in 2003 brought together 11 young adult leaders to explore these issues and learn how to take their new insights and tools back into their organizations. The 2004 session began in February and will be co-facilitated by Ernest Rugwizangoga, a graduate of Peace and Justice Leaders 2003.

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Spirit in Action aims to support this growing movement to integrate spirit and action as well as facilitate the introduction of Circle tools and perspectives into the progressive movement for political change. Circle facilitators have made a strong beginning, and there is a significant desire by Circle participants to increase their skills and ability to take the tools into other areas. When Spirit in Action staff, for example, visited the Louisville Circle, participants asked, “When can we come to Massachusetts to be trained?” Many other participants are anxious to develop their skills and take on leadership tasks. In response to the survey, for example, a third of those replying to a question about their ideal ongoing connection with Spirit in Action checked “I want to be trained and become a Circles of Change facilitator.”

Spirit in Action is not alone in doing this work. As a number of Circle participants have noted, there is a great deal of energy around the Circle model and many kinds of Circles are coming into being. Nina Laboy, for example, observed:

I keep getting emails or having conversations with other people that are saying that they have a circle of neighbors that they are meeting with and talking over the question of the war or ... other topics you know.... A big field is growing, which is cool. We are changing the planet, hopefully!

This growing field can only serve to make the work of social transformation more possible and powerful.

*A big field is growing,
which is cool. We are
changing the planet,
hopefully!*

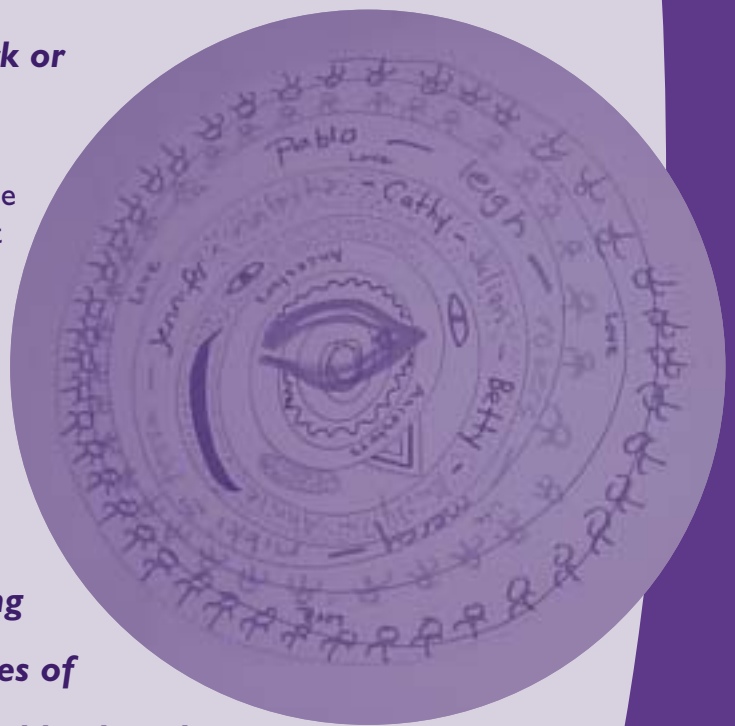
Future Directions: New Questions and Next Steps

“I will be interested in what it will be like five years from now and to see how (Circles) affected their work or their cities.”

—Sheila Sutton, Louisville Circle participant

“It was important to me to know that what we were doing in our Circle was connected to something much larger. The experiences of our Circle were being shared back with the larger Spirit in Action community, so that our work was feeding into the learning of the whole network.”

—Laura Loescher, Bay Area Pilot Circle facilitator



The Circles of Change story began with a response to the needs of activists at a particular time in history, the late 1990s. These specific requests, however, exist within the wider and longer-term work of building a broad-based movement for change, and since September 11, 2001, the social and political landscape has changed in obvious as well as less-documented ways. Even as a perpetual “War on Terror” looms darkly, those who have a different vision for the country are moving forward urgently to work cooperatively and accelerate the process of change.

Such movements for social and political change are complex, but models of their development have been created to serve as a kind of road map for planning the work ahead. The New World Foundation recently produced a publication on movement building that provides a relevant four-stage model¹⁰, which has been informative to those involved in Spirit in Action’s work:

Stage 1: Building Infrastructure of Organizations, Networks, and Leaders, including such tasks and benchmarks as: building new levels of leadership, consciousness, and collaboration; increasing alliance building and the linking of activists and leaders across sectors, ethnicities, generations, etc.

Stage 2: Building Identity and Intention, including such tasks and benchmarks as: defining vision and deepening commitment to the cause; promotion of collaboration over fragmentation; development of an integrated social agenda; and expansion of leadership.



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Stage 3: Social Combustion in which spontaneous waves of social action produce new and spontaneous waves of mobilization. In this stage “what seemed impossible in one generation is inevitable to the next.”

Stage 4: Consolidation or Dissipation in which the movement’s worldview informs the next generation and this is either built into the structure of society or the movement scatters.

Through the process of developing this report as well as the interconnected curriculum-development work, Spirit in Action staff, board, and committee members have deepened their understanding of what it means to build a movement for change that is holistic and grounded in the belief that personal, group, and societal transformation need to happen simultaneously. Committee members have begun to talk about Circles’ four foundational elements of Spirit, Vision, Healing Divisions, and Action as core strategies for transformational movement building. They are critical to advancing the movement-building work of Stages 1 and 2 (see above). If this foundational work can be accomplished, Spirit in Action puts forward the possibility that this current movement and its participants will have the resources to avoid dissipation or co-optation, but will instead continue to innovate and grow in influence.

As Spirit in Action moves into the future, staff and program participants will build on the strengths identified in this report, address the gaps needed to strengthen the work, and encourage further exploration and innovation to meet the changing needs of those who are passionate about creating a positive future.

Successful Work to Continue and Expand

In reflecting on the findings of the evaluation process, the Spirit in Action staff and committee members have summarized the strengths of the Circles program as:

1. Providing support for individual change and growth of those working for change in wide variety of ways within the context of a supportive community. Although not an original goal of the Circles, participants experienced powerful personal change as members of the Circles community. Future Circle work will include and further this foundational piece of social and political change work.
2. Increasing awareness of, and tools for, doing the work of:
 - Spirit*, particularly by inviting spirit into groups that are diverse and committed to social and political change.
 - Vision*, particularly by using a positive approach and encouraging a long-term perspective.
 - Healing Divisions*, particularly through building diverse community that serves as a model for the change activists want to see in the world.
 - Action*, particularly through adding an awareness of self-care, relationship building, and dialogue into the realm of action.
3. Focusing on leadership development and support for Circle facilitators and most active participants who are committed to bringing the Circles approach into their personal, work, and activists' lives.
4. Sharing the vision of Spirit in Action that Spirit, Vision, Healing Division, and Action work need to be interwoven to create deep and lasting change.



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Core Questions to Be Explored in Future Circle Rounds

During each round of Circles work, new and vital questions have surfaced. The following questions lie at the heart of the next rounds of Circles work.

Spirit How can Circle participants bring spirit-centered tools and approaches into activist groups when there is a great deal of skepticism, antipathy, or negative feeling about spirit?

Vision How can Spirit in Action continue to strengthen the connection between vision work in Circles and action in the external world?

Healing Divisions How can Circles of Change create tools, activities, and approaches that help people recognize the privilege they are accorded by racism, sexism, etc. without creating polarization and crippling guilt?

How can Circles create tools, activities, and approaches that invite people to develop their power and leave behind the voices of internalized oppression?

In a society with a mainstream norm of individuality, how can we create tools and approaches that support collective action across lines of difference?

Action How can activists work together toward a common vision when they have many different views on strategy?

How can Spirit in Action support Circle participants to use the power of their new Circle community to network and coordinate their work for change?

Movement Building How can Spirit in Action foster movement-building consciousness in those who want to create a better world?

Supports Needed to Increase Successful Work and Address Questions

Throughout the evaluation process, Circle of Change facilitators and participants have suggested the following improvements most often:

Strengthen the Circles of Change curriculum as well as the training for Circle facilitators. As noted, this work is already underway and a new Curriculum Guide will be available in the fall of 2004.

Increase Spirit in Action's infrastructure and organizational tools for supporting and expanding the leadership network of Circles of Change participants and facilitators, including adding an area of the web site devoted to Circle tools and sponsoring events and shorter trainings in the areas where Circles are active.

Because no single organization can build a movement, seek opportunities to work collaboratively with those in the field of integrating spirit and action.

Continue to innovate and experiment, because as the external world changes and movement building progresses, the work of Spirit in Action and Circles of Change will need to shift to meet changing realities.

Next Steps for the Circles of Change Program: 2005–2007

Using a new Circles of Change Curriculum Guide, outreach and training for volunteer facilitators of Circles will begin early in 2005. New Circles will be launched in areas of the country where Circles have been active as well as in two to three new areas. A focal point for this new round of work will be building the Circle Leadership Network, in which facilitators are given intensive support and training and are connected to a peer group. Participants of Circles may go on to join the Circle Leadership Network and become a facilitator.

The components of the Circle Leadership Network are:

Training for Trainers Program with two sessions per year consisting of:

- Outreach for volunteer Circle facilitators. This group will draw from past and current participants and be diverse, with special attention paid to race/ethnicity, age, and spirit perspective.
- Training for Trainers Program, consisting of a one-week introduction to Circles curriculum and leadership development exercises.
- Weekly conference calls in groups of no more than eight with a Circles of Change staff coordinator while Circles are running.
- An area of Spirit in Action's web site for sharing insights on using Circles tools and approaches. This will be open to all participants.
- A three-day regathering of facilitators at the end of Circle sessions to reflect on their experience and provide feedback on the program.

Spirit in Action will continue to form leadership committees, such as the Evaluation and Curriculum Development Committee, to further the work of the organization as well as build the leadership capacities of participants and nurture a national network of highly skilled facilitators of social and political transformation.

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READER REFLECTION

WHAT IS YOUR HIGHEST DREAM FOR THE FUTURE?
WHAT WORK IS NEEDED TO MAKE THE DREAM A REALITY?

Visions of the Future: Beyond 2007

Beyond the two-year emphasis on building the Circle Leadership Network, Spirit in Action has long had the vision of a large gathering, called a Summit, that brings together all those who have participated in Spirit in Action's programs. The Summit will be designed to cross barriers rapidly by bringing people who may not often have contact with each other into the same space to work collectively. The goal of such a Summit is to accelerate the process of creating a unified, vision-focused, national movement for transformative action. Priorities and proposals for specific action would emerge from the Summit process, and Summit participants will be organized into groups to work on implementation plans.

How will the world change as Circles grow and the work of change presses forward? A Spirit in Action friend once said, "The work we are doing to make change in this country is like writing science fiction." As we close this report, we invite you to take a walk through a world that might seem like science fiction, but it is grounded in seeds of reality visible in the work of Circles and so many other change efforts today. The following is a vision that might lie just beyond our reach, but is possible in a shifting future:

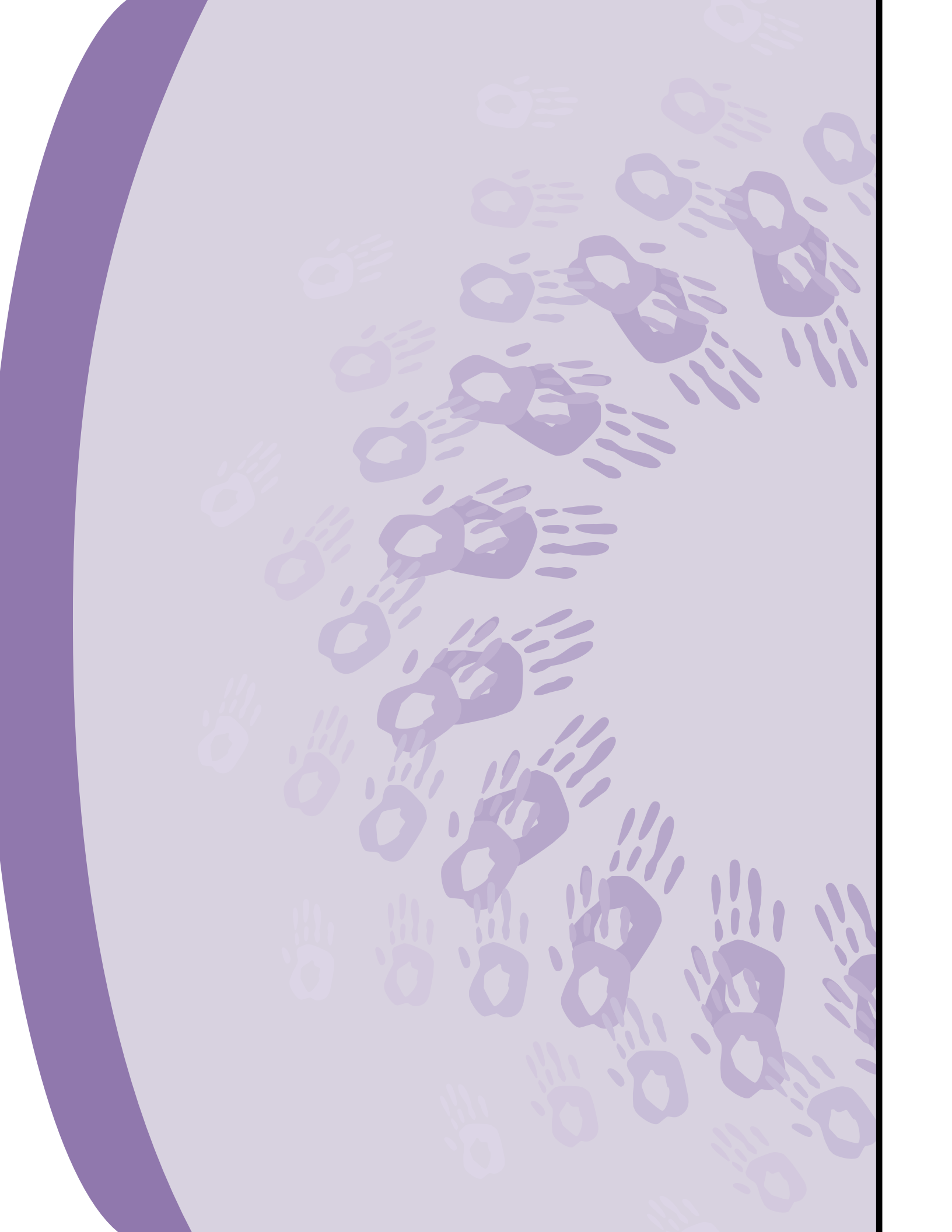
You wake up in the morning to breathe fresh air. Once you might have wheezed with asthma, but since new clear air legislation was passed and communities began starting their own wind generation centers, the health of all has improved. After breakfast, you walk through your neighborhood, ambling by the Freeman, Hutchinson, and Ruiz houses. These are your closest neighbors, but you know everyone on your street from monthly neighborhood gatherings where folks gather to eat, catch up on each others' lives, and talk about neighborhood needs. These conversations prime the pump for town and state council meetings where there is lots of discussion of different ideas and viewpoints before new policies are enacted. You've come to realize that this deep dialogue is necessary for democracy to work fully.

*You reach the bus stop and find your friend Sam is reading a newspaper called **U.S.A. Tomorrow/El Pais Manaña**. Like all official documents, the paper is bilingual, and depending on the area, the second language is Spanish, Chinese, Hindi, or Arabic. Folks who called themselves progressives started the paper back in the first years of the century. They did a good job of shifting how the news was reported by highlighting root causes of national problems, amplifying the voices and opinions of regular folks so they could impact change, and bringing the arts forward as a way to grapple with the complexities of life. You remember some of the headlines you read in the paper over the years: "Publicly Funded Day Care Provided for All Children," "Education Spending Finally Outstrips Military Spending" and "Universal Health Care Bill Passed." Those old progressives had to work hard, and you are grateful to them for all the change they set in motion. Some of them lived to see it. Others just counted on the benefits their children and grandchildren and those beyond to the seventh generation would receive.*

They left you a world where different spiritual practices and religions are honored, sexual orientation is respected, racial and ethnic differences are sources of pride, not discrimination, and the disabled, elderly, and youth are allowed to participate in society. In this world everyone is given the opportunity to contribute their gifts and share in leadership responsibilities. It's not a perfect world—lots of work is required—but it is a beautiful world.

The work of Circles has and will continue to support the journey toward positive visions such as this one.

FUTURE



Methods:

How we did our work

Design & Process of Circles of Change



Activities • Atmosphere • Resources
Facilitation Practices • Flow • Evaluation Tools

Spirit in Action selected a participatory methodology as a model for the evaluation process. Spirit in Action's existing approach to work and program development are generally congruent with participatory evaluation approaches, including an emphasis on process, working to develop the capacities of participants, using facilitators as catalysts, and recognizing the insights and ideas of participants as valid knowledge to be shared widely.

The fact that Circles are spread across the country, however, created some challenges to a pure participatory process in which whole groups decide collectively on future actions. Thus, a committee of facilitators with representatives from different Circles around the country was formed to serve as a bridge between the regions and the program as a whole. Work planning was done using the flow of a participatory evaluation that can be broken down into four stages: preplanning and preparation, generating questions, data gathering, and analysis and action.¹¹

Preplanning and Preparation

The first task was to select a project coordinator and Spirit in Action was able to fill this role with existing staff. Staff member Carolyn Cushing had joined Spirit in Action after spending two years as a site research facilitator for the Changes Project, in which five Adult Basic Education programs in Western Massachusetts conducted a participatory action research project focused on the impact of welfare reform, immigration reform, and the changing nature of work on 620 of their fellow adult learners.¹² As noted in the Introduction, Circle facilitators representing diverse backgrounds and locations were recruited to serve on the Evaluation and Report Committee. Karen Hutchinson (Bay Area), Pamela Freeman (Philadelphia), Scherazade King (Boston), and Natalie Reteneller (Louisville) served throughout the project, and Spirit in Action Director Linda Stout attended all committee gatherings.

METHODS

To prepare for the first gathering of the committee in May 2003, Spirit in Action staff prepared a "Seed Report" that outlined strengths that had been identified following the last round of the Circles of Change Program and proposed possible future directions. Committee members then convened special Circle sessions to gather input and feedback from Circle participants. Committee members thus came to their first gathering carrying not only their own views and impressions, but also the stories and ideas of the wider Circle community.

At the first gathering, committee members grounded themselves in the purpose of the project by answering a popular participatory evaluation question, "Who wants to know what for what purpose?" Through art activities and storytelling, the committee developed a list of the various purposes and agendas of the evaluation process, including:

- Identify patterns, stories, metaphors, maps, and new mirrors for activists to use in doing their work for change.
- Provide time and structure for those participating in evaluation activities to reflect on their Circle experience.
- Continue to build the Circles of Change/Spirit in Action community by keeping in contact with participants.
- Maintain a global perspective even though we are looking at realities in the U.S.
- Produce a report that creates credibility, resources, and support for this transformative, spirit-centered approach to movement building.

Generating Evaluation Questions

At the gathering, Evaluation and Organizational Development Consultant Diane J. Johnson, Ph.D. helped the group to narrow and organize their investigation into three areas. The diagram on the title page of this section represents the investigation of the committee. The following broad questions more fully describe the areas under investigation:

Meanings, Supports, and Barriers How do Circle participants define the work of connecting spirit and social justice, developing positive vision, healing divisions and creating collaborations, and taking action for transformative change? What supported, and what were the barriers to, the work of spirit, vision, healing, and action?

Impacts What was the impact of Circle participation on the individual, the Circle as a developing community, the wider community in which participants work or live, and the movement for transformative change?

Design and Process What activities best supported the work in each area? What aspects of the overall atmosphere, process, or resources supported the most impact? What facilitation practices supported the most impact? What flow increased supports and lessened barriers?

Using this diagram, the committee then brainstormed and prioritized detailed questions to ask evaluation participants that would elicit data on meanings, supports, barriers, impacts, designs, and process.

Committee members discussed the pros and cons of various information-gathering techniques and decided to carry out:

- A review of existing Circle reports from 2001 and 2002, which captured and contained detailed feedback, ideas, and suggestions of the facilitator group.
- Focus groups (also called Inquiry Circles) to encourage group discussion and gain a broad view of participants' ideas and experiences. The committee recognized that this would be the best tool to use with existing Circles.
- Interviews to gather more in-depth and detailed stories about the Circle experience and its impact.
- An online survey to reach greater numbers of people and gather data that could be easily quantified, such as the use of Circle tools in outside contexts. The survey was selected as a tool that could be sent to all Circle participants with email access and reach those who had no other ongoing connection to the organization.

Spirit in Action staff member Carolyn Cushing took the list of questions and developed interview guides for the focus groups and interviews.¹³ Committee member Natalie Reteneller assisted Carolyn with the development of the online survey. All tools and further details on the process will be available on Spirit in Action's web site at www.spiritinaction.net by the fall of 2004.

Data Gathering

Committee members, with the assistance of Seattle facilitators Bill Aal and Margo Adair and Western Massachusetts facilitator Phyllis Robinson, gathered their data throughout the spring, summer, and early fall of 2003. All focus groups were videotaped and then transcribed. Interviews were tape recorded and then transcribed. The purpose of data gathering was explained to all participants and all participants signed a consent form describing how data would be used.

Existing Circle Reports from 2001 and 2002 Carolyn Cushing examined all reports and organized them into topic areas related to the main areas of Spirit in Action's work (spirit, vision, healing divisions, action, movement building, and community building) as well as logistical topics such as facilitator issues and Circles recruitment. The resulting 114-page document was a source for both evaluation and curriculum development work.

Focus Groups Five focus groups were conducted with a total of 28 participants: two in the Bay area (the ongoing 2001 pilot Circle and a new Circle formed in 2003) and one each in Louisville, Philadelphia, and Seattle. Participants were for the most part a subset of the Circle the facilitator originally ran. Focus group facilitators all used the same question guide and ran the session using a Circles approach. All groups began with a meal as well as an opening ritual.

Interviews The Evaluation Committee met to collectively decide whom to interview. They selected interviewees based on who would have a story that needed in-depth telling and sought to ensure the diversity of the pool of evaluation participants. Nine Circle participants participated in interviews lasting from 40 minutes to three hours. All interviewers began with the same interview guide, but as a conversational tone seemed appropriate to this evaluation tool, interviews varied. Seven facilitators participated in shorter conversations about how being a Circle participant has impacted them over time.

Online Survey Spirit in Action developed its first online survey and sent email invitations to participate to the 94 Circle participants with email addresses listed (although a number of these were returned as undeliverable). Twenty-eight people responded, and for 73 percent of them this was the first evaluation activity in which they participated. This group of respondents represented 21 percent of the total pool of participants in 2001 and 2002 Circles.

Demographic Breakdown of the Data Pool In tracking the demographics of evaluation participants, the goal was to mirror the diversity of the original group of Circle participants. Coming up with summarized demographic information was challenging for three main reasons: demographic information was collected differently in different Circle sessions and evaluation activities, some information was missing, and in many cases the information collected was qualitative and included very unique descriptors for aspects such as spirit perspective or sexual orientation. Umbrella categories were developed in the process of preparing the report and a variety of older categories were made to fit into these new categories in the charts below. Carolyn Cushing did this work and often had to make a judgment call as to where to place a piece of qualitative information. Categories may vary slightly by chart, but are clearly labeled. Numbers may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding off and people self-identifying in several categories.

The qualitative data collected in interviews and focus groups was weighted more heavily in the development of report findings.

A Benchmark: Circle diversity statistics for seven of nine 2002 Circles (72 participants and facilitators)

UMBRELLA CATEGORY	PERCENTAGE	DETAILS OR EXAMPLES
People of color	50%	25% African American or Afro Caribbean; 15% Latino(a)/Chicano(a); 10% Asian or Asian American. A Chicana and Latina also identified as part Native American/indigenous
White	49%	
Other/mixed race	1%	
Female	60%	
Male	40%	
Transgendered		
Spiritual or eclectic practice	26%	Examples in this category include: "Jewish/meditation/other; Spiritual—no identification, Quaker/Pagan/Buddhist leaning, looking for a spiritual home, and Earth/Goddess."
Religious or former religious affiliation	71%*	46% Christian; 10% Jewish; 14% Buddhist; 1% Muslim. *This number includes a number of affiliations from childhood that may or may not be practiced as an adult.
Other/seeking		
Atheist or agnostic	3%	This represents two people; one atheist and one agnostic.
Homosexual/queer	39%	
Heterosexual	60%	
Age—in 20s	47%	
Age—in 30s	15%	
Age—in 40s, 50s, 60s	37%	8% in their 40s; 13% in their 50s; and 1% other

Qualitative Evaluation Data: 44 participants in focus groups and interviews

UMBRELLA CATEGORY	PERCENTAGE	DETAILS OR EXAMPLES
People of color	39%	20% African American or Afro Caribbean; 11% Latino(a)/Chicano(a); 7% Asian or Asian American
White	52%	
Other/mixed race	4.5%	
Unknown/not addressed on questionnaire	4.5%	
Female	75%	
Male	25%	
Transgendered		
Unknown/not addressed on questionnaire		
Spiritual	59%	Examples of descriptors in this area: "Spiritual non-religious, mostly Buddhist, open to many paths, meditation practice, eclectic."
Religious	27%	Examples of descriptors in this area: "Buddhist, Wiccan, raised Christian, radical and secular Jew, Jewish eco-feminist."
Other/seeking		
Atheist or agnostic		
Unknown/not addressed on questionnaire	14%	
Homosexual/queer	52%	16% Lesbian; 25% Queer; 11% Bisexual
Heterosexual	30%	
Unknown/not addressed on questionnaire	18%	
Age—in 20s	11%	
Age—in 30s	20%	
Age—in 40s, 50s, 60s, 70s	39%	29% in their 50s; 16% in their 40s; 2% in their 70s.
Unknown/not addressed on questionnaire	30%	
Poor, lower or working class	11%	Examples of descriptors in this area: "working class, raised poor."
Middle class	27%	
Upper or owning class	7%	
Mixed class	7%	
Unknown/not addressed on questionnaire	48%	

Qualitative Evaluation Data: 28 respondents to the online interview

UMBRELLA CATEGORY	PERCENTAGE	DETAILS OR EXAMPLES
People of color	29%*	19% African American/Black; 8% Latino(a)/Hispanic; 4% Native American. No one identified as Asian American, Filipino(a), or Middle Eastern
White	71%*	
Other/mixed race	14%*	
Unknown/ question skipped	7%*	
Female	57%	
Male	29%	
Transgendered	7%	
Unknown/ question skipped	7%	
Spiritual	75%*	
Religious	7%*	
Other/seeking	39%*	Further information included: "pantheist, Buddhist and pagan wanna be, grounded, Buddhist, spiritual leader, and animist."
Atheist or agnostic	0%*	
Unknown/ question skipped	7%*	
Homosexual/queer	54%	11% Lesbian; 11% Queer; 32% Bisexual
Heterosexual	25%	
Unknown/ question skipped	21%	
Currently poor, lower or working class	43%*	4% Poor; 11% Low Income; 29% Working Class
Currently middle class	53%*	
Currently upper or owning class	7%*	4% Upper Class; 4% Owning Class
Mixed class	7%*	
Unknown/ question skipped	7%*	

* People identifying in multiple categories resulted in totals greater than 100%.

The big picture that emerges from the statistics above is of a group of evaluation participants that is not exactly the same as the Circle participant subcategory but still clearly diverse in similar ways.

Analysis and Action

As the bulk of the data gathered was qualitative, a great deal of information had to be organized, reflected on, and examined. As in other qualitative research efforts, the Evaluation Committee members grounded themselves in the data and looked for recurring patterns, themes, language, and metaphors to inductively build their finding statements from the views of Circle participants and facilitators.¹⁴

The Evaluation Committee worked individually and then collaboratively to analyze the data. Each committee member took a transcript from an activity they had conducted and went through line by line connecting participant statements to the topics under investigation from the categories developed at their first gathering (meaning of spirit or impacts on an individual, for example). Phyllis Robinson and Carolyn Cushing worked on the rest of the transcripts. These coded transcripts were then organized into six master summary documents: Spirit, Vision, Healing Divisions, Action, Impacts, and General/Process. These documents became the sources of information for the Evaluation Committee's regathering in October 2003.

At the regathering, committee members broke into small groups to develop broad statements of findings that were grounded in, and connected to, the statements of evaluation participants as represented in the master documents. Carolyn Cushing then developed these statements and supporting quotations into draft documents. Draft documents then went through an iterative process of feedback from committee members and from participants quoted in the document. The committee, evaluation consultant Diane Johnson, and a number of outside readers reviewed a final comprehensive draft. Feedback was incorporated into the final document, which you hold in your hands.

The action aspect of the project came primarily through sharing of findings and making recommendations to the Curriculum Development Committee and Spirit in Action's Board of Directors. These findings and recommendations were influential in shaping the overall approach and development of specific activities of the Circles of Change Curriculum Guide as well as setting Spirit in Action's program and organizational goals.

References, Sources, and Resources

Introduction Section

¹ The three reports from which the needs for the progressive moment were developed are: Sally Covington, *Moving a Public Policy Agenda: The Strategic Philanthropy of Conservative Foundations* (National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, 1997); *Reconstructing Society through Social Change: A Meeting of the Nonprofit Practitioners Project* (Harvard University's Hauser Center for Nonprofit Organizations, 1999); and *The Listening Project: A National Dialogue on Progressive Movement Building* (Peace Development Fund, 1999).

Spirals of Learning: The Circles of Change Program Section

² Francesca Polletta, *Freedom is an Endless Meeting* (University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 66.

³ Claudia Horwitz, *The Spiritual Activist* (Penguin Compass, 2002), p. 176.

Vision Section

⁴ Information on Dutch futurist Fred Polak and the visioning work of Elise Boulding taken from: Elise Boulding, "Practice Love and Sustain Hope" in *A Handbook of International Peace Building into the Eye of the Storm*, ed. John Paul Lederach (Joessy-Bass, 2002), pp. 299–304.

⁵ Steven Covey, et al, *First Things First: To Live, to Love, to Leave a Legacy* (Free Press, 1996), p. 103.

⁶ Paul H. Ray and Sherry Anderson, *Cultural Creatives* (Harmony Books, 2000), pp. 340–341.

⁷ Diana Whitney, et al, *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2003), p. 180.

⁸ Sally Roesch Wagner, "American Women," *Yes!* magazine (Spring 2002, Issue #21), pp. 18–19.

⁹ Michael F. Leonen, "Etiquette for Activists," *Yes!* magazine (Spring 2004, Issue #29), p. 41.

Future Directions: New Questions and Next Steps Section

¹⁰ "Funding Social Movements: The New World Foundation Perspective" (available from The New World Foundation, 666 West End Avenue, Suite 1B, New York, NY 10025).

Methods: How We Did Our Work Section

¹¹ Overview of participatory evaluation methodology and work flow taken from: Office of Evaluation and Strategic Planning of the United Nations Development Programme, “How to Do Participatory Evaluation” from *Who Are the Question-Makers: A Participatory Evaluation Handbook* (available online at www.undp.org/eo/documents/who.htm, 1997).

¹² Further information on the Changes Project can be found at www.sabeswest.org/publications/oeri/changes1.htm.

¹³ Works consulted to develop focus group and interview guides include: Richard Krueger, *Focus Groups* (SAGE Publications, 1994); and Ernest T. Stringer, *Action Research* (SAGE Publications, 1996).

¹⁴ Works consulted on qualitative research and data analysis include: Matthew B. Miles and A. Michael Huberman, “Making Good Sense: Drawing and Verifying Conclusions” in *Qualitative Data Analysis*, 2nd edition (SAGE Publications, 1994), pp. 245–287; and Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, 3rd edition (SAGE Publications, 2001)

Peer Organizations and Partners

No Ordinary Time, an organization that works primarily with young activists, artists, and faith-based leaders to integrate faith, spirituality, and reflective practice into social justice work. (Boston, Massachusetts; phone: 617-661-9700)

Project: Think Different uses pop culture to change the world—one mind at a time. By creating a whole new world of music, film, and video, PTD believes we can inspire people to tune into the world instead of zoning out. (www.projectthinkdifferent.org)

stone circles sustain activists and strengthen the work of justice through spiritual practice and principles. (www.stonecircles.org)

Tools for Change is a multicultural organization that promotes healing, leadership development, and sustainable democracy. (www.toolsforchange.org)

Training for Change is a training organization for groups that stand up for justice, peace, and environmental harmony. (www.trainingforchange.org)

Women’s Theological Center engages and supports women’s spiritual leadership, using the power of women’s gifts, deepest values, and hopes as a creative force to strengthen ourselves and our communities, to bridge differences, and to work for justice throughout society. (www.thewtc.org)



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**The 28 Respondents
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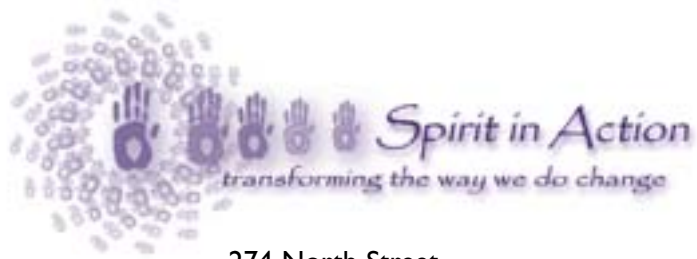
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