

# Proposal for the Formation of a Justice Commission

## ***Mission & Purpose:***

To recommend a process for the Regional Church of Northern California-Nevada to authentically engage the questions on the hearts and minds of the Region.

Throughout history, groups and governments have sought answers after seasons of divisiveness. We are inspired by The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC); a body assembled in South Africa after the abolition of apartheid to, as the name implies, seek both truth and reconciliation after the injustices of apartheid. This effort helped bring together a badly polarized nation and solidify its new democracy. Our goal is similar: to establish, through a Justice Commission, a process to engage the differences within our region, to give voice to diversity, to inquire and seek information, to create opportunities for education and conversation and to provide processes for advocacy and healing.

## ***How CCNC-N got here:***

For a number of years this region used the same process as the general church to address major issues relevant to the life of faithful Christians and the life of a faithful church: resolutions. Resolutions were authored by local churches, regional committees, commissions and were submitted to the Resolutions Committee for review. Resolutions were placed before the Annual Meeting by the Resolutions Committee expressing a variety of issues and concerns: these included business items related to structure, programmatic and ministry concerns, and items that pertained to issues of peace and justice.

Resolutions were brought to the Annual Meeting, debated and voted upon. Resolutions that were based on peace and justice concerns often invited congregations and individuals to take a stand or engage in actions which some believed engendered polarization. Resolutions were voted upon and either approved, disapproved or sent back for further work. Some folks relished the debates and supported this model as a meaningful way for the church to discuss and act on an issue or concern, while other folks felt that this model was divisive and set up a winner/loser relationship that damaged the unity of the church.

Responding to the movement away from resolutions, in the mid-90's the Annual Meeting created the Study and Concerns Committee to provide a process for engaging the church in study and action around urgent and important issues facing the church. This committee was composed of 18 members representing the geographical diversity of the region (two members from each geographical area plus a few others). Despite the best efforts of those involved they were unsuccessful in addressing their created purpose. In 2006 the Regional Board voted to put the Study and Concerns Committee on sabbatical. This left a void in the regional church's capacity to engage issues on the hearts and minds of those in the region.

In November of 2008 a vote on "The California Marriage Protection Act" came before California that illustrates the repercussions from this void. A Regional Pastoral letter about Proposition 8 and the ensuing vote and the forms of argument in the media over the vote, lifted up differences in opinion and practice in our churches and the region as a whole. Proposition 8 was not merely a political issue but a personal issue for many Disciples

and touched on the differences in our theological and Biblical understandings. Our gay and lesbian pastors and lay leaders who invest their time and involvement in the Region felt the weight of this political vote acutely. They felt pain in the rejection of their identity as whole persons and their equal rights as citizens. In prayer and discernment, the Executive Committee of the Regional Board initiated a process for healing and reconciliation.

It also became clear to the Executive Committee that there was a void in the Region's ability to engage such issues of peace and justice and open the door for true Christian dialogue and discussion. Again in prayer and discernment, they created the Justice Commission Formation Task Team (JCFTT). This Team composed of two members from the Pastoral Relations Committee, two Regional Elders, two members of the Executive Committee, a former Regional Minister and a current Region Minister, were commissioned to fill this void so that the urgent issues of our day could be addressed. Over the last year this group met four times face to face and three times via conference calls. Two outside consultants were asked to give guidance in forming a process large enough to encompass the entire Region, flexible enough to authentically welcome the diversity in our region, and hopefully actually workable.

At this point, there are details yet to be determined for the Justice Commission:

- forms of leadership
- number of members
- mechanism to receive the questions on the hearts and minds across the Region
- how this Commission might choose from among the many questions that will undoubtedly will be received.

The JCFTT is excited about the possibilities of the following "Circles of Peace" Process. The pages that follow offer a beginning form, philosophy, and outcomes this process would provide. It is our intent that the "Circles of Peace" Process would engage the very questions that have brought the Region to this point in its history. Some of the areas that might be brought to the Justice Commission are offered here as merely a beginning point (not limited to these). Keep in mind, the goal here is not about defending a vote, but bringing the people of God into open and honest conversation to build understanding and relationship: Open and Inclusive of LGBTTQ people; racism; access and physical abilities; water rights and allocation; true hospitality and welcome; immigration; calling a Regional Minister (NO, Ben is not leaving); merging with other regions (some regions have already done this and others are in discussion)

### ***First Steps at Regional Assembly***

The JCFTT would like to invite wider input from those present at 2010 Annual Meeting to receive broader thinking, feeling, reaction. To introduce the CCNC-N Region to this process and offer an experience of how it could work we propose using the first step of Circles of Peace which is the Circle of Inquiry. Our hope is to provide meaningful discussion and dialogue to the gathered community and appropriate a 'first run' of the process. This would occur on Saturday morning at Annual Meeting as part of the State of the Church Address. The following two questions would be raised for discussion using a modified World Café process of small groups of no more than 5-6 formed ad hoc but with a trained convener.

“When the church engages in prophetic witness how does it affect me, my church, the world?” and “When the church is silent about such issues how does it affect me, my church, the world?”

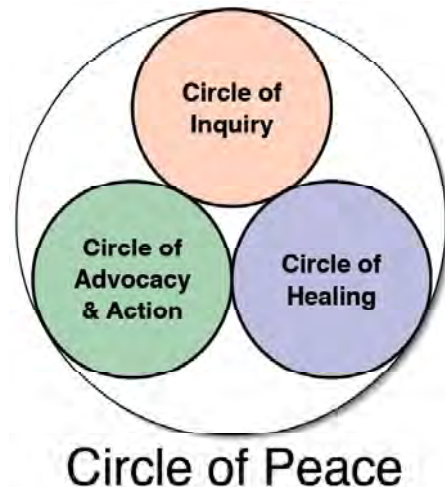
## Circles of Peace:

### A model of communication that invites us from conversation to action

The model is comprised of three circles placed inside a single larger circle. The rims of the circles are firm. There are strong boundaries around the intention of the circles, their time and task. This is deliberate and will be part of the covenant of the circle. The circle takes the community away from the hierarchical form of community that we have become used to and takes us forward into a model where each voice is heard – and those being silent are noted.

In Christina Baldwin’s book **Calling the Circle** she describes the circle as follow:

- a council of ordinary people who convene to create a sacred space and accomplish a specific task, supporting each other in the process.
- has a sense of containment, a beginning, middle and end framed through simple rituals appropriate to the group.
- has a shared, verbalized intention that everyone knows why they are gathered.
- self-governs and corrects its course through the adoption of commonsense agreements of behavior.
- when confusion arises, everyone agrees to reflective silence, refocus on the group’s highest purpose and follow protocols for problem solving that reestablish trust and cohesion.
- responsibility is shared as the group comes to rely deeply on Spirit.



## Why a Circle:

*To form a circle is the choice to remove oneself from the middle, and to place something else there around which we all can gather. Every circle, from the first campfire to the United Nations, asks for this commitment: to put at the center the group’s highest purpose, and to sit on the rim focused on that purpose. Humans started here– literally facing the fire and tending the needs of the community– and here is where we return–using circle to face the burning questions of our times and tending to their solutions. (from <http://www.fromthefourdirections.org/>)*



### Circles of Inquiry:

The goal of the circle is to give many views their voice, to investigate the issue by asking sincere questions, and tell stories of how the issue relates to each participant. The circle will be called for a set period of time that can be revisited by the members of the circle.

Although the discussions will hopefully have someone in the group who feels passionately about acting on the issue or needing support and healing around the issue, the Circle of Inquiry is not the place for that. The Circle of Inquiry should be a safe place for someone to

support **and** for someone to disagree. If someone is seeking support and sees the group as an advocacy group for them, it is much less likely that someone who sincerely believes it is wrong will speak up and share their opinions and questions in fear of hurting someone in the community whom they care about. Circles of Inquiry are not for everyone.



### **Circles of Advocacy & Action**

As a result of discussion, members of the Circle of Inquiry and other members of the community may want to move forward into some form of advocacy or action. This circle is **not** the same circle as the Circle of Inquiry. As a result of the Circle of inquiry someone might want to be part of the change happening around the topic. This might be advocating for or against legislation, sharing information about current political actions that have an effect on those affected. When people understand an issue, they are more likely to get behind it – for good or ill depending on your perspective on the issue.

It is possible that opposing views may come from Circles of Inquiry. What we have gained from the process is that we have a better understanding of those with whom we disagree. We disagree on the issue and with the action and still are able to remember the story and humanity of those with whom we disagree.



### **Circles of Healing**

The third circle is a Circle of Healing. This may be a support group of people affected by the topic. It may also be a group of people who want to participate in offering support to those affected. It will be a community of people with a common need or a desire to provide a non-anxious presence while waiting for healing to happen. It is possible that two or three different circles may form with different intents. And that is as it should be.

### **Covenants**

In order for the circle to work, there are covenants to which the participants agree at the first meeting. The following covenants were developed by Christina Baldwin and can be found on the Peer Spirit website: <http://www.peerspirit.com/htmlpages/circlebasics.html>

- We will hold stories or personal material in confidentiality and honor other material, information or decisions with a level of confidentiality appropriate to the setting.
- We listen to each other with compassion and curiosity.
- We ask for what we need and offer what we can.
- We agree to employ a group guardian to watch our need, timing, and energy. We agree to pause at a signal, and to call for that signal when we feel the need to pause.

A note about confidentiality: It is important within the community of the circle that participants feel safe to share their stories without fear that things will be shared outside the circle without their permission. It is also important to the larger community that the learnings of the circle be shared. When sharing the new wisdom gleaned from the circle, it is best to use I statements rather than share personal information belonging to someone else.