

**Review of *Peacemaking Circles: From Crime to Community* by Kay Pranis, Barry Stuart, and Mark Wedge (Living Justice Press, 2003)
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Spend any time in criminal court and you'll be struck by the degree to which silence and helplessness predominate. Sure, some people get to do a lot of talking, and some – one in particular – have a great deal of decision-making power and control over the proceedings. But many of the people who have a stake in what happened don't have any kind of say in how it gets dealt with, and can only wait in mute anger or fear or subservience for the sentence to be handed down.

In peacemaking circles (also called sentencing circles), all this changes. The offender, the victim, their friends and families, and others in the community who have reason to care about what happened, all get to speak and all generate a response or responses in the aftermath of the crime. Circles are familiar to anyone who has done some reading in the field of restorative justice, and the newly formed Living Justice Press, which aims to publish books that will serve the restorative justice movement, has chosen *Peacemaking Circles: From Crime to Community* as its first book. The volume is written by three leading Circle practitioners: Kay Pranis has served as the restorative justice planner for the Minnesota Department of Corrections, Barry Stuart has been a judge of the Territorial Court of the Yukon, and Mark Wedge has served as a mediator and Circle Keeper both within his own Carcross/Taglish First Nation community and outside of it.

Other classic restorative justice books are probably better introductions to the concept in general, but *Peacemaking Circles* does not seem as if it's meant to be the first book one reads on the topic. It has clearly been written in response to people who have asked how Circles actually work and how communities can go about holding them. It reads primarily like a useful handbook; a workshop-in-writing with three wise and experienced guides. Yet the book also manages to give even readers unfamiliar with restorative justice a sense of how the concept turns the punishment model inside out by asking very different kinds of questions and coming up with very different kinds of answers.

The Circle process is really about exploring how human beings can draw upon their deepest reserves and best intentions to figure out how to respond when harm has been done or bad things have happened. The authors take us

through the process step by step, discussing everything from how to make sure people feel safe expressing whatever they feel to how to choose an appropriate talking piece (the symbolic object that gets passed around the Circle allowing each person to speak). Sometimes even these quite detailed descriptions left me wishing to be taken inside the process more fully; I wanted to know the actual dialogue that led to the innovative and healing solutions that the Circles generated. That may be more than a book can show, however, and the solutions we get to hear about are so heartening, and so different from what most courts would come up with, that they do demonstrate how profoundly valuable the Circle process can be.

Circles are ostensibly about responding to crime or conflict that has already taken place, but *Peacemaking Circles* shows us how they are also about getting to the root of the problem and thus, in many cases, about preventing further harm. Some of the most inspiring examples in the book are about Circles that come together in response to a particular incident – say, a young man accused of stealing – and, in the process, learn so much about the underlying factors and challenges in the offender’s life that they devise community responses and support systems that go well beyond the original incident. Similarly, the examples of Circles among people who had previously feared or hated one another – like those used among rival gangs or between youth and police officers by the Boston-area community development organization Roca – are some of the best examples of actual, sustained peacemaking I’ve heard about anywhere.

Peacemaking Circles is a book many people in the restorative justice world have been waiting for. With it now available, let us hope for more community justice initiatives and more creative and healing responses to crime.

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