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FINDING VOICE:  
AN EXPLORATION OF A COMMUNITY—BASED ADULT LEARNING PROCESS

by

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A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the graduate School of the

UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI-ST. LOUIS  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

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with an emphasis in Adult Education

August, 2006

Advisory Committee

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## Abstract

The Circles of Hope is a dialogue and support group process that uses personal support, education for action, and organizing for change as a method for their own personal development and change and to become agents of change in their own communities. Case studies summaries based on individual interviews and participation in a focus group were developed for seven women who have been regular participants in the Circles of Hope. Using cross-case analysis as the key analytic framework (Miles & Huberman, 1984), change was examined across three themes, the process experience, personal growth and change, and engagement in community. This analysis began the process of building a theory of adult learning based on the experiences of these women with the Circles of Hope that directly links personal change and development to increased engagement public life as a change agent.

The model that emerged identified five key factors for personal growth and change affected by the participation of the women in the Circles of Hope that contributed to the development of their capacity to become engaged in their communities. These factors include focus, risk taking, developing voice, exploring identities, and a changing world view. These factors were both shaped by the Circles of Hope process and contributed to the ongoing evolution of the Circle as a place for continued personal growth and change.

This research found that the women were able to become engaged in creating change in their community. They became engaged by: a) representing themselves and their Circles in other community organizations and activities, b) bridging to other women and organizations involved in community change locally, nationally, and internationally, c) engaging in local community development efforts, and d) connecting their development efforts to their passions.

The Circles of Hope process is generative in that the Circle made it possible for the women to grow personally and to use that growth to create change in their communities. In so doing the women also affected the growth and development of the Circle itself, incorporating their learning into the development of the Circle and transferring their learning into other areas of their personal and community lives.

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I want to express my sincere appreciation to my committee and the faculty of the adult education program. All of the faculty were generous in their assistance, insightful in their teaching, and inspirational in their work. I want to thank Dr. Paulette Isaac-Savage for serving as both my advisor and my dissertation chair. She was a terrific guide through the program and contributed a lot of time and energy to this study. I also

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## Chapter One Introduction

Communities all over the world are struggling to decide what they want for the future. There is pressure on communities to participate in an increasingly global world which does not easily reward difference. In the *Lexus and the Olive Tree*, Thomas Friedman (1999) notes that people are caught between two or more opposing forces. On the one hand they value the traditions of their local cultures and communities, yet, on the other hand, they want to take part in an increasingly global economy that does not value community culture and traditions as anything other than novelties. These local cultures reflect values people hold dearly and often cannot be assigned an economic value. What is the value of a language, a value system, a culture? People are struggling to find their voice, afraid of losing their voice if they have one, or they are fighting to keep their voice from being drowned out by the rest of society. As the world becomes more and more interconnected, preserving those things that make us unique becomes more difficult. This interconnectedness challenges some of the basic sensibilities of individuals, communities, and societies forcing them to adopt new values that are in conflict with basic belief systems held dearly. These are the kinds of changes that impact how people view and relate to one another. A process for dealing with these types of changes is a purposeful attempt to manage the changes that question people's core values, beliefs, and attitudes about the world. It engages those affected by change in a process of understanding the impacts of what is occurring and helps to create the capacity within people to manage change in their community or institution (London, 1996). An important role of adult learning is to develop the capacity within people to define their values, cultures, and traditions in ways that they can be preserved while still participating in the ever-changing broader society which at times has little respect for those traditions.

### *Community Change*

Change is affecting people's capacity to maintain connections to those things important to them. Some rural areas are experiencing rapid rates of immigration and the new immigrants bring their cultures, values, norms, and languages with them. For example, Sullivan County, a rural community in Northeast Missouri, saw its Latino population increase from 28 to 634 between 1990 and 2000, a 2,164.3% increase, while the overall population of Sullivan County only increased by 14.1%, from 6,326 to 7,219 during the same time period (MCDC, 2004). In a small, rural community this represents a tremendous change with accompanying implications for education, healthcare, housing, community decision-making, and self determination.

Urban communities are also facing dramatic changes although the changes may look differently than they do in a rural area. Jennings, Missouri, a suburb of St. Louis, experienced a small population decrease of 2.7%, going from 15,905 in 1990 to 15,469 in 2000 (MCDC, 2004). However this figure masks some of the radical changes taking place in that city from 1990 to 2000. For example, the African American population increased by 27.8% from 7,693 in 1990 to 11,785 in 2000 (MCDC, 2004). The white population decreased 30.2% going from 8,145 in 1990 to 3,254 in 2000 (MCDC, 2004). The changes in Jennings also have broad implications for education, healthcare, housing, community decision-making, and self determination but in different ways. For example, the population changes in Sullivan County impact the education system in different ways than it does in Jennings. Sullivan County may not have the resources to deal with the growing number of limited English speaking students and in Jennings the high student turnover can slow down the learning in the classroom and make it difficult to develop appropriate educational programming. How do people in these rapidly changing circumstances cope with the changes going on around them? Is it possible for people to understand what is happening to them in these communities? What role can adult

education play in helping people understand and address change, participate effectively in the larger society, and preserve their identity, norms, and values?

When communities are undergoing change, particularly dramatic change such as a radical transition in the demographic composition of the community, it is a challenge for the people involved in that change dynamic to integrate safely into the community. The new faces such as the Latinos in Sullivan County or the African Americans in Jennings may face resistance to their integration into the community. In places where change is occurring one measure of whether or not they are being positively integrated into the community is the degree to which they experience discrimination. From 1995 to 2000 in the agriculture Midwestern states of Kansas, Iowa, Missouri, and Nebraska, Missouri had the largest total number of reported hate crime offences against Latinos even though Missouri had the smallest number of Latinos (Jeanetta & Lazos, 2002). While this may not prove Latinos are disenfranchised in Missouri, it does provide some indication that they are not being fully incorporated into society.

How do people begin to find their voice when they have been disenfranchised by the greater society? One key is the formation of communities and the learning that takes place in those communities. Communities are an integral part of people's lives and everyone belongs to communities where learning occurs (Galbraith, 1995). By basing the learning in a community it also implies that the community itself plays a role in the education process. What role does community play? To answer this we will look at community, community-based education, and the role community-based education plays in the development of community.

Community-based education provides a framework for looking at a learning process that helps people in a larger society, largely disenfranchised by that society, find their voice, and create public space for themselves. This allows them to develop in a way that preserves those values important to them. Community-based education is an

education process that enables people marginalized by the larger society to create safe places for learning, to develop their own communities, and make it possible for them to participate in the broader society as change agents.

### *Community*

Community provides a public organizational framework for looking at change and how it affects people and their cultures. Michael Galbraith (1995) noted that there were many different working definitions of community, but that most place an emphasis on human interaction, relationships within places, commonalities in interest, and values and mores. This definition may be broadened to incorporate other factors and should not be limited to the concept of place as the only context in which relationships are important to community. A broad definition grounded in community development theory defines community as “interactions among people for mutual support” (Adams, Jeanetta, Leuci, & Stallmann, 2004, p. 16). This definition focuses on the relationships among people as foundational to community. Relationships established for mutual support implies that the people come together for the purpose of supporting one another. Interactions may focus on providing resources that all members of the community need such as infrastructure, police, fire, and education—services that are expected in most place-based communities. This may include providing services to disadvantaged people or to areas of the community with greater risks. People within a community may also interact in ways that define how they as a group want to interact and relate to others. Any group of people who come together to provide mutual support can be considered a community in this context (Adams, Jeanetta, Leuci, & Stallmann). They can be as small as a few people or as large as a nation depending on the type of interaction and support the community defines as its own (Batten, 1957).

Domahidy (2003) put forth two assumptions about how community can impact our understanding of it. The first assumption addresses how we know community, and



the second how we understand the basic nature of community, which can affect how we relate to community as educators and as participants. Our assumptions about community affect how we view both what a community is and how we relate to that community.

At root, then, questions of theory also raise philosophical questions regarding what we assume about the nature of the world and how we know it. We then act on those assumptions. In most cases we either assume the community is something external to us and to be acted on, predicted, and managed; or we are the community and create it through our ongoing processes of interaction. (Domahidy, 2003, p. 78)

Both perspectives on community are valid and affect our look at community-based education and its role in development.

Broadly speaking there are two important community types, communities of place and communities of interest (Adams, Jeanetta, Leuci, & Stallmann, 2004). A community of place includes towns, neighborhoods, cities, counties, states, and countries—virtually any area that can be bounded geographically. Communities of interest are those communities not bound by place. They often include professions, professional associations, service organizations, or any group bound by a common interest where mutual support is needed or provided by the group. Community, whether it is a community of place or a community of interest, provides the context for learning in a community-based education process.

### *Community-based Education*

Community-based education is an approach to education in communities that facilitates learning through interaction. The learning process is developed in collaboration with the community and is designed to address an issue or provide support to some aspect of that community (Mason & Randell, 1995). In many Missouri

communities, for example, community-based education programs have been established to serve the educational needs of women, new immigrants, minority and ethnic groups, and others whose educational needs are not adequately met by mainstream educational processes. In Sullivan County, an organization called Centro Latino was formed in 1996 to help the new Latino immigrant community create a place for themselves (V. Mensa, personal interview, February 4, 2005). Through Centro Latino, new residents are learning English, addressing healthcare and housing issues, and are building multi-cultural collaborations with other local groups using a community-based approach to learning.

Community-based education is, for many people, a local response to the changes occurring in the world that marginalize people and disconnect them from the values, norms, and customs that are an essential part of their identity. It offers a means of learning that respects those things identified as being important to people and provides an alternative form of learning which helps them grow personally as well as shaping the larger society. This relates to what Paulo Freire (1971) refers to as praxis, people acting and reflecting on the world in order to change it.

Learning in a community-based education context is a discovery process (Mason & Randell, 1995). It involves people developing skills and values based on their experiences and those of their community. It is a process of finding voice: "Coming to voice is not just the act of telling one's experience. It is using that telling strategy to come to voice so that you can also speak freely about other subjects" (hooks, 1994, p. 148). When a person has a voice their ideas, experience, and words count. Voice is critical to many marginalized communities because often their perspectives are not directly included in the public dialogue on many of the issues affecting their development and the development of their community and broader society. For example, the views of African American women are often considered represented by their identities as

African Americans or as women but rarely as both (Harris, 2000). African American women may have concerns that need to be part of the public dialogue that are not adequately addressed through feminist or civil rights organizations. Community-based learning provides a place as well as a context for the development of voice. Voice is developed in the learning process when the learners are able to articulate and name those things impacting their lives, the lives of their friends, and family, and the issues impacting the broader society. They are able to make connections between events in the larger world and their realities and they are able to speak to those connections in ways that engage them as functioning members of society (hooks).

Learning in this context is also a process of understanding the broader world and our place in that world. In a community-based learning process, people are often engaged in a process of dialogue and reflection. This process can lead to a better understanding of the structures in the community and broader society that place limits on people so that they can effect change that will help them begin to remove some of those barriers (Corson 1998; Freire, 1971). Learning objectives often include developing an understanding of the issues impacting the development of people, setting goals to address those issues, developing plans, setting up support systems, and implementing programs that create change in the community (Payne, 1998). Participation and collaboration are key characteristics as the community plays a leadership role in developing its own learning agenda. The learning may take place in formal, nonformal, or informal contexts (Galbraith, 1995).

Values are an important part of the community and are reflected in the learning principles adopted by the community. Effective community-based education programs have well-defined and articulated principles that govern the engagement of the participants in the process (Decker, 2002; Siemens Ward, 2001). This is critical to women, minorities, and other groups who may be marginalized by the mainstream

society and find the need to create their own structures to guide their learning (Corson, 1998). For those engaged in the practice of community-based education there is a strong desire to have a well articulated set of principles that reflect the values, norms, and customs of the community. This is important to the community because the values and norms of the community may be different from those of the larger society. These principles serve as a basic set of agreements among the learners that contribute to the creation of a safe environment for learning and serve to build common ground among diverse peoples (Payne-Bell, 1998).

*Contexts for learning.* Many people marginalized by the larger society are working in their communities to develop educational programs that will help them carve out a niche for themselves that reflect who they are, what they want for themselves and their community (Magendzo, 1990). For example, in Boston, a community-based education program was started by a non-profit organization to help Latinas learn English (Young & Padilla, 1990). The women understood that not having a working knowledge of English put them at a disadvantage. Other Latinas who spoke English were doing much better economically and they believed it was because they spoke English. The original program was successful and grew from 8 to 20 women participants in its first year. The women created their own organization to continue their work and in eight years it grew to include 135 women. They expanded their educational programs to include counseling, academic and technical education as well as the original English as a second language program. In many places marginalized communities are developing programs that reflect their unique cultural traits and values and are finding ways to include their voices in a larger societal dialogue (Corson, 1998). It is a struggle because the larger society does not necessarily understand or value their input. They need safe places to learn—to better understand the broader society so that they can participate in a meaningful way and help to shape society in ways that are more respectful to their

norms and values. For some people, community-based education provides such a learning environment.

There are a number of contexts within communities (universities, community colleges, businesses, churches, and civic groups or organizations) that offer learning environments for adults to begin to address community issues. Some of these learning environments can be formal, such as those offered by universities and community colleges, and others can be nonformal or informal (Merriam & Brockett, 1997).

Universities are a major source of education through their certificate and degree programs, continuing education courses, and outreach and extension activities.

Presidents from state and land grant universities acknowledge the public nature of their efforts and recognize the need to commit to lifelong learning as core to their mission (Kellogg Commission, 2001). They also acknowledge a need to become engaged in shaping society by making the university accessible, providing research that helps develop an understanding of society's major issues, and link new knowledge to the realities facing society (Kellogg Commission). There are training programs in the workplace where adults can learn the skills they need to perform their jobs well.

Churches provide educational programs on a wide range of topics and issues (Isaac, 2002). Many church-based programs are designed to address social justice issues by either informing their members about issues or by engaging in outreach activities. Often community-based education programs are initiated through a church or faith-based program. For those who provide community-based education, the programs can be formal, informal, academic, extension, popular, or school or home based. The important thing is that the programs are based in the community and reflect the values, norms, and identity of the people that community represents. Community-based education programs are owned by the community, help people find voice in the larger

society, and address the issues and concerns that the community decides are important to their development.

Community-based education programs have been developed by many marginalized groups as a response to educational programs that do not meet their needs. Small, grassroots organizations often offer educational programs to community members and serve as links to informal networks among similar types of groups and organizations. Often it is through these networks that learners will begin to exercise their voice. Grassroots women's organizations are skilled at this type of networking and have developed extensive networks of community-based organizations (Purushothaman, 1998). Because of the wide ranging experiences and scope of women in community-based education it is possible to better understand the potential of community-based learning as an approach to adult education through the experiences of women.

#### *Women in Community-based Education*

Women often play a leadership role in community-based education. They run successful community-based organizations in many parts of the world (Jaeckel & Laux, 2001; Purushtothaman, 1998). Their efforts are broad in scope, sometimes focusing on larger societal issues such as housing and unemployment but are often locally focused, operated, and managed. Their influence has been growing in ways that most people do not recognize, because they only know them as small groups of women going about their business in their communities and do not realize that they have something to say. The public has historically had a difficult time recognizing the work of women because the public sphere has typically been dominated by men and culturally is reflective of the roles men play in the public (Stall & Stoecker, 1998). The work of women has historically been confined to the private sphere of the home and neighborhood which has been idealized as a safe haven. However, many women of marginalized communities such as African Americans, Latinas and Asians, were often excluded from the ideal of

the private sphere as a haven from the cruelties of public life and often extended the private sphere beyond the home and neighborhood into extended community networks as a survival strategy (Stall & Stoecker). Many of the community-based education efforts of women engaged in addressing issues of development reflect a private sphere orientation. The women do not call attention to themselves, preferring to work within their own groups and networks. Unbeknownst to many, they have developed national and international networks of women that are very diverse, with connections to each other based on their differences and similarities.

One such organization is WomanSpirit, a local organization based in St. Louis, Missouri, which is part of a national organization called the National Center for Neighborhood Women (NCNW) based in New York. The NCNW is part of a larger international network with offices at the United Nations called Grass Roots Organizations Operating Together in Sisterhood (GROOTS International). Through NCNW, the women of WomanSpirit are able to participate in national discussions that are continued at the United Nations. Hence, they are able to participate in national and international dialogues that help shape national and international policies regarding development decisions that impact women and their families. These types of networks provide opportunities for local community-based women to share their ideas and experiences with other women and participate in public forums that give voice to their issues.

*WomanSpirit.* WomanSpirit, a not-for-profit, 501 (c)(3), founded in 1993, by LaDoris Payne Bell, is a community development and education organization, located in Jennings, Missouri, a suburb of St. Louis. The organization's main concern is the development of women. WomanSpirit has focused on engaging women in a community-based learning process called the "Circles of Hope", which is a tool for personal growth and community development.

The leadership of WomanSpirit decided early on that they wanted to chart their own way locally but recognized that they needed the support of other organizations in order to develop and maintain their independence. They worked through their churches but found that there was not much room for an Afri-centric, gender-based dialogue within their church structure. Few of the women were Catholic but they found that the Women Religious in the Catholic Church provided a better model for them. They built networks with the Women Religious groups in the area and used these relationships to connect into other support systems.

The Ursuline Sisters, a religious order of women in the Catholic Church, founded in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, by Saint Angela Merici, were the most helpful collaborators for WomanSpirit as it began its work. According to the Ursuline Academy of New Orleans (2005), Sister Angela believed that “the key to a civilized, spiritual society was the education of its women, the hearts of their families, and primary educators of their children”. The Ursulines are a religious order focused on education with specific attention to women and girls. By collaborating with WomanSpirit the Ursulines were continuing the work of their founder begun nearly 500 years ago.

The Ursulines helped WomanSpirit in a variety of ways. They were able to help facilitate the purchase of two of their buildings by WomanSpirit that were being vacated. A place to call its own was an important step in the development of WomanSpirit. One of the Ursulines nuns was a co-founder and has been an important supporter throughout the life of the organization. An important role she played was to serve as a bridge between WomanSpirit and the other women religious orders in the area garnering much needed support and assistance. The relationship between WomanSpirit and the Ursulines got so close that the executive director and several of the women involved in WomanSpirit were made Ursuline associates, a designation given to lay people they believe share some of the same principles valued by their founder Angela Merici. The



Ursulines also helped them reach out to other women for support through their network of religious orders. They were able to facilitate relationships with groups in the Catholic Church that may not have been as open to WomanSpirit without that partnership.

WomanSpirit also developed relationships with other organizations interested in the development of women such as the Woman's International League for Peace, the Center for Concern, and the National Congress for Neighborhood Women. WomanSpirit got involved in these organizations and began to build an extensive support system through these networks. From the time the organization was founded in 1993 connection to other women around the world was important to them. In 1995, they sent delegates to the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing China where they networked with many other international women's organizations. They became involved in implementing the platform for peace and as a result became networked locally with some of the organizations that had national and international development ties such as Woman's International League for Peace. The most important of these networks was the National Congress for Neighborhood Women (NCNW). WomanSpirit is a member of NCNW and NCNW is a member of GROOTS International (Grassroots Organizations Operating Together in Sisterhood). GROOTS holds regular events in conjunction with UN events held around the world. Through this relationship with GROOTS WomanSpirit has had the opportunity to share their stories, experiences and insights on an international stage.

WomanSpirit has participated in several peer exchanges with other grassroots women and got involved in addressing national and international development issues important to women. The women from WomanSpirit were able to speak about experiences as low-income women in St. Louis, and to offer testimony in a wide array of international forums where low-income African-American women had not been heard before. Low-income is defined as the taxable family income of a person that does not

exceed 150% of the federal poverty rate which for an individual was \$14,700 in 2006 (OPE, 2006). As a result of participation in these exchanges the women were able to incorporate some important concepts into their own development practices. In the process they developed their own voice and a greater understanding of the importance of their voice in shaping the society in ways that benefit the women in their group. LaDoris Payne-Bell, the executive director of WomanSpirit, articulated this phenomenon when she talked about the importance of voice for the poor:

It's a known fact that when you're talking about welfare reform or food stamps that you need to get some poor people at the table. But when you start talking about things like State budgets and policies that impact the poor it's not as apparent that anyone needs be at the table so equipping people to be part of public agendas, public dialogues, and public policymaking. [That] I think is a very important part of change. (L. Payne-Bell, personal interview, January 9, 2004)

Women and other groups of people whose opinions are marginalized by the broader community are often searching for a voice that reflects the whole of who they are (Delgado & Stefanic, 2001). Community-based education may offer a way to help them find and develop that voice. WomanSpirit, through its Circles of Hope, is a community-based education process offering a means to develop the capacity for marginalized women to develop their voice.

*Circles of Hope.* The Circles of Hope is a *learning process* developed by WomanSpirit designed to help women find and use their voice so they can articulate the issues that have the greatest impact on the lives of the women who participate in a Circle. The Circle helps women develop plans to address issues affecting their development and provides a support system that makes it possible for women to try out

new ways of doing things for themselves and their families that are productive and healthy for them (Payne-Bell, 1998).

Circles of Hope is also an *educational process* that focuses on empowering women to make educated choices about the important things affecting their lives and their families.

The Circles of Hope process is designed to complement existing programs and resources serving families. It provides a flexible, adaptable, and community-based method of communication and problem solving. Because Circles of Hope integrates issues of peace and justice with the lived experiences of those affected by violence, the specific contents of each group's agenda is determined by the needs of the families who are members of that particular group. (Payne Bell, 1998. p.

7)

The Circles of Hope process is one of social transformation. Through this educational process women are able to empower themselves to address the issues affecting their own personal development and transform their families and communities. When asked whether or not she saw their organization as a "change agent" in the community, LaDoris Payne Bell, the executive director, said "we change people and people change communities... so yes, I see us as a change agent" (personal interview, January 9, 2004).

Many women are living in environments where things happen to them that seem out of their control. They are considered by many as victims of circumstances beyond their control—loss of jobs, family breakup, drug abuse, community deterioration, and violence among others. Society has developed inadequate mechanisms for meeting their needs so the women in their community are left to their own devices.

Circles of Hope uses a support-group process to help women educate themselves, understand the issues affecting their lives, make plans that address these issues, implement projects in a supportive environment, and connect what is important in their community to changes occurring locally, regionally, nationally and internationally. The three main aspects of the program are social support, education for action, and organizing for change (Payne-Bell, 1998). These three elements of the Circle work in tandem to create a safe environment for learning that supports the work of the women.

An evaluation of the Circles of Hope process was conducted in 2003 by the Center for Social Justice Education & Research, School of Social Service at Saint Louis University. There were three objectives of the evaluation:

- 1) To explore meanings that group participants assign to the experience of belonging to a Circle.
- 2) To assess whether involvement in Circles fosters participants' development of psychological sense of community and heightened personal efficacy.
- 3) To determine if participation in Circles raises a behavioral component of psychological empowerment, citizen participation (Abrams & Wilson, 2004).

Thirty-three women participated in one of six focus groups and completed a questionnaire. 82% of the participants said they were very satisfied or satisfied with the process. A number of participants related to factors indicating a strong sense of community. For example, 97% said they are willing to work with others to improve their community and if they choose to, can participate in important decisions that affect their lives. 88% said their voice was heard and valued in the Circles. There were also notable finding related to personal and collective self-efficacy. 92% said they thought it helpful to join with others to solve problems. 91% noted that when there are activities to address a problem of interest, they try to get involved; they would rather take action on an issue than trust that things will work out; and feel they are able to improve

themselves, their community, and make things better for others (Abrams & Wilson, 2004).

The experiences of these women have brought them in contact with people from around the world whom they have brought to the St. Louis area through peer exchanges and other programs that encourage the sharing of best practices. In 2002, Dr. Wangari Maathai came to St. Louis for a peer exchange with WomanSpirit. She is the executive director of the Greenbelt Movement in Kenya where they have created a network of thousands of small community groups including over 150,000 women using similar educational processes to those employed in Jennings by WomanSpirit. The women in the Greenbelt Movement have literally transformed their environment by planting more than 30 million trees since 1978 (Maathai, 2004). In 2004, Dr. Maathai became the first woman from Africa to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. In her Nobel lecture, Dr. Maathai mentioned the importance of community-based education as a tool for becoming better educated about their society, learning more about the causes of issues and their relationship to their own circumstances:

In order to assist communities to understand these linkages, we developed a citizen education program, during which people identify their problems, the causes and possible solutions. They then make connections between their own personal actions and the problems they witness in the environment and in society. (Maathai, 2004)

Because of her work on the environment, Dr. Maathai was sought after locally by some of the largest environmental institutions in the area such as the Missouri Botanical Garden, the St. Louis Zoo, and universities. WomanSpirit coordinated her visit with each of them and they offered to support her stay by raising some money for the Greenbelt Movement in Kenya. This is the only time WomanSpirit was ever acknowledged locally for their contributions to society and it was because of a connection to someone else

who does the same kind of work, but has more visibility and celebrity status. As soon as Dr. Maathai left, WomanSpirit returned to its work and obscurity in the eyes of the broader culture which often overlooks the amazing contributions WomanSpirit makes to the community on a daily basis. The women have important things to say and work to ensure that their voices and other women who share similar values are heard in the broader society.

*Finding Voice.* Women are often voiceless in our culture and African American women can be even more isolated because they experience intersectionality which means experiencing oppression from multiple directions because they are women and they are African American (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Because of intersectionality, they are not fully represented by the movements with which they are associated. The agenda of the feminist movement is dominated by the white women who provide the leadership and the agenda of the civil rights movement is dominated by the men (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). African American women have made important contributions to both movements but they are not often acknowledged appropriately for their contributions and thus are marginalized within the movements that are supposed to represent some of their key interests (hooks, 1990). African American women involved in WomanSpirit have an opportunity to find a voice that is theirs. They can share and develop that voice in ways that make it possible for them to more fully participate in the broader society and through the movements they associate with such as the feminist and civil rights movements.

The women of WomanSpirit offer their perspective on a range of issues affecting everyone, but their emphasis is on women and families. They address issues in creative ways that respect the things most important to them such as their values and principles and how the people they choose to work with relate to them. As a result they begin to develop a picture of the world different from what currently exists and they work quietly,

tirelessly to make those changes. In Kenya, the Green Belt Movement has been more openly successful on a grand scale but they are part of a network, a Movement of women who desire to create a world friendlier to the needs of women and families and one that is more sustainable and balances environmental concerns with social and economic needs. WomanSpirit is connected to Green Belt through their International network and are able to learn from them as well as share in their success.

Foundations and other donors often say that they cannot get people involved in the low-income communities in which they work. That is not an issue with a community-based group like WomanSpirit. They are the community. They can easily get 50 to 100 people to attend a meeting because they are a trusted resource in their neighborhood. They are trusted because they are locally understood, share a common set of values based on respect for difference and diversity because that is who they are. In addition, they are also the best informed about what is happening across town, the country, and around the world. A better understanding of how the work of an organization like WomanSpirit impacts the people who participate in its programs can provide insights into how community-based education facilitates change in people and communities. These insights may be useful in developing models of community-based learning that helps others find their voice.

#### *Research Question*

How has participation in Circles of Hope impacted the lives of the women who have been engaged in the educational process? Implicit in this question is the assumption that change has occurred as a result of their participation. I want to explore two aspects of this change process? 1) How has participation in the process changed them personally? and, 2) How have these women become engaged in creating change in their families and communities?

### *Purpose*

There is a need to better understand how the participants of community-based education programs would describe the process, the learning, and its impact on their lives and communities from an insider's perspective. This research hopes to add to the understanding of community-based education by exploring the experiences of women in an established community-based organization engaged in community-based education. There are a number of studies that examine the experiences of women in a community-based learning context (Canepa, 1999; Corson, 1998; Fasheh, 1990; Magendzo, 1990; Randell, 1993; Young & Padilla, 1990) but they do not explore the voices of the women themselves to better understand how the learning process itself affected their ability to address change but focus instead on specific changes brought about by the learning. Thus the purpose of this study is to explore "in their own words" the change process they went through as a result of their association with WomanSpirit and the Circles of Hope process.

### *Significance*

In studying the Circles of Hope process I hope to learn more about how the process works from the perspective of the women. I am interested in their personal stories. Through their stories I hope to better understand the changes they have undergone personally and how they have applied what they have learned in their communities. What did they learn? How do they use what they have learned? Do they understand the issues impacting their lives? What kind of plans have they made? Are they better able to make decisions for themselves? How has the process helped? How are they supported? How have they changed in order to better deal with these issues?

Women tend to be overrepresented in our poor communities so they feel the impact of policy choices sooner than everyone else. In order to understand what is happening in communities, particularly those under stress, community-based



educational approaches offer approaches to learning that identify what people care about, what they bring to the table, and how they would begin to address the issues impacting their lives. By exploring Circles of Hope through the voices of the women themselves, it may be possible to better understand how participation in the learning process helps women develop voice and increase their capacity to transform themselves and their communities.

This research is part of a theory-building process where I will begin to map the learning of the women in the Circles of Hope process. I will document their experiences and explore the structure of the learning process. It will add to our understanding of how women create change in a community context and draw on theories of community, feminism, womanism, critical race theory, and emancipatory and transformational learning to examine the learning process of a group of women. The resulting stories will enrich each of these theories. I know from my own personal interaction and history with some of these women that they have had success in addressing some of the critical issues affecting their lives. In this research I am exploring their learning process to see what role their learning played in that development. What worked for them what did not work for them? What influence did their learning play in their development? Their experiences and the stories they share will add to our knowledge of how adult women learn, reveal how these women use their learning process as a development tool, and add to our base of knowledge in adult education.

This research will provide a greater understanding of how a community-based learning process helps participants address the issues affecting their lives. Through their stories I will demonstrate the relationship between their learning and the development of their capacity to affect change on their own behalf and that of their community. While the factors identified in this research will not translate directly to others' experiences a greater understanding of the process that the women in the

Circles of Hope experience will identify factors that others may want to consider in their own practice or research.

### *Organization of the Study*

In this chapter I make the case for exploring the learning of women in a community-based adult education process. I placed their experiences within the context of change that many of us are facing but disproportionately affects women—especially women of color. How do people preserve those things that are important to them such as their values, culture, and identity when the pressures of society are asking them to change, to be like everyone else? It is difficult for people outside of the mainstream culture to hold on to what is dear to them and to find a voice that expresses their differences in a positive way that the broader society will accept.

I introduced the Circles of Hope process developed by WomanSpirit, St. Louis, Missouri, as a community-based adult learning process developed by the women to deal with changes affecting their lives in a manner that respects their learning needs and reflects their culture and values. It is a community-based learning process that has helped them develop their own voice and makes it possible for them to participate more fully in their community. This dissertation seeks to develop a deeper understanding of the Circles of Hope process and how it has helped the women of WomanSpirit develop themselves personally and address change in their community

The remainder of this study is organized into six chapters, a bibliography, and appendices. Chapter two presents a review of the literature as it relates to feminism, womanism, critical race theory, transformational learning, and community education. Chapter three explains the design and methodology. This will be a qualitative research study based on individual interviews with six women and a focus group employing a case study analysis and a cross-case analysis. Chapter four will present the findings of the research. Each woman will be profiled as a case study. In chapter five we will

explore the findings of a cross case analysis of the case studies. Chapter six will contain the summary, conclusions, and recommendations of the study. A bibliography and appendices will conclude the study.

### *Key Terms*

#### **Adult Learning**

Adult learning is the process whereby adults acquire and develop skills, attitudes, beliefs, and understandings about the world. The learner is at the center of the learning process and is considered an active participant sharing responsibility for their learning. It includes as a major concept Andragogy, “the art and science of helping adults learn” (Knowles, 1980, p. 43).

#### **Change Process**

A change process is a purposeful attempt to manage the changes that question people’s core values, beliefs, and attitudes about the world. It engages those affected by change in a process of understanding the impacts of what is occurring and helps to create the capacity within people to manage change in their community or institution (London, 1996).

#### **Change Theory**

A theory of change looks at the processes implemented by groups and organizations that initiate change in individuals, groups, organizations and society. It considers how people interact, social systems change, and actions by individuals, groups, and systems can create positive results through a change process (Shapiro, 2005).

#### **Community**

A community is interaction among people for mutual support. Communities can be very small or large but share a common purpose where interaction and support are necessary. There are two types of communities, communities of place and communities of interest (Adams, Jeanetta, Leuci & Stallmann, 2004).

### **Community Development**

Community development can be defined as a planned and organized process through which people and communities learn how they can help themselves. It is a process through which people and communities acquire the attitudes, skills, and abilities for active participation in creating meaningful futures and dealing with community issues (Adams, Jeanetta, Leuci & Stallmann, 2004). In this context education is part of a larger community process, conforms or develops values and attitudes in the community, and enables people to be more active in their community.

### **Community Education**

Community Education programs are education programs based in the community by groups of individuals “bound by some single common interest or set of common interests such as leisure interests, civic and special political interests, or spiritual and religious beliefs and affiliations” (Galbraith, 1995, p. 3). According to the National Community Education Association community education is often associated with the community school—a facility often open beyond the traditional work day for the purpose of providing academic, recreation, health, social service, and work preparation programs for people of all ages (National Community Education Association, 2004).

### **Critical Race Theory**

Critical race theory questions the foundations of the liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law. Critical race theory looks at how society organizes itself along racial lines and hierarchies in an attempt to not only understand the social situation but to try and transform it for the better (Delgado & Stefancic 2001).

### **Emancipatory Learning**

Jurgens Habermas is widely considered the primary originator of contemporary ideas about emancipatory learning. In his theory of communicative action he discusses three

broad domains of learning as the technical, the practical, and the emancipatory which correspond to the different aspects of our social lives, work, interaction, and power. Emancipatory learning is the development of self-knowledge. Self-knowledge means be able to look critically at one's own history and biography and look at how that history expresses itself in how a person sees themselves, their relationship to community, and the expectations that society places on them (Habermas, 1984 & 1987).

### **Feminism**

Feminism is a social theory and political movement primarily informed and motivated by the experiences of women. While generally providing a critique of social relations, many proponents of feminism also focus on analyzing gender inequality and the promotion of women's rights, interests, and issues. Feminist theory aims to understand the nature of inequality and focuses on gender politics, power relations, and sexuality. While generally providing a critique of social relations, many proponents of feminism also focus on analyzing gender inequality and the promotion of women's rights, interests, and issues (Wikipedia, 2005).

### **Finding Voice**

Finding voice is a learning and development process whereby a person seeks to develop the capacity to share their experience. It is a learning process in that as a person shares their experiences they are able to reflect on that experience and learn from it (Winter, 1998). Finding voice is a developmental process that helps people, understand themselves and the multiplicity of identities they represent. It includes fostering self confidence and self efficacy and is inclusive so that people are able to share the diversity of realities that they face. (Iglesias & Cormier).

### **Process**

Process, integral to learning and addressing change, is a series of activities a person or group of people go through as they learn or acquire a skill.

Process refers to a progression of events that is planned by the participants to serve goals they progressively choose. The events point to changes in a group and in individuals that can be termed growth in social sensitivity and competence. (Biddle & Biddle, 1965, p. 79)

### **Transformative Learning**

Transformative learning is an education process that occurs when people are able to view the world differently and adjust their perspectives and actions accordingly (Mezirow, 1981). Transformative learning as a term was popularized in the field of adult education by Jack Mezirow who defined transformative learning as

the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs that will prove more true or justified to guide action. Transformative learning involves participation in constructive discourse to use the experience of others to assess reasons justifying these assumptions, and making an action decision based on the resulting insight. (Mezirow, 2000, p. 8)

### **Voice**

Voice is not simply having the capacity to share ones personal experience with others publicly. "Coming to voice is using that telling strategy (sharing experiences) to come to voice so that you can also speak freely about other subjects" (hooks, 1995, p. 148).

### **Womanism**

Womanism seeks to develop feminism in a manner that better reflects the experiences of African American women.

Black feminist and womanist thought are committed to the liberation of black women and women of color from the oppressors of race, class, and

gender, encompassing both political cognizance and the action needed to achieve this liberation. Black feminist thought represents multiple states of consciousness, with evolving theories that recognize resistance movements of the past and their contributions to the foundations of black feminist and womanist thought in the present and in the future. Finally, the terms black feminism and womanism celebrate black women and women of color recognizing a history, and validating it as being both valuable and complex. (Feifer & Maher, 2003, p. 9)

## Chapter Two Review of the Literature

Chapter two is a review of the literature as it relates to developing an understanding of the Circles of Hope process within the context of community-based learning that addresses change. There are four parts of this analysis. The first part explores the context for learning in this project which is the community—specifically a community of women. We will analyze community, consider the theories behind community development, contrast the theories behind community-based learning and community education, and explore the experiences of women in community-based learning. We will approach learning in community from two perspectives, community-based learning and community education; defining each, exploring differences and similarities, and building the case for community-based education as an appropriate process for addressing change in community.

The second part of this chapter is an exploration of feminist and womanist theory. Women have been marginalized by society and they have a rich history of addressing change through learning. We will explore feminism and the efforts of feminists to create change. Some of the theories that have emerged from the feminist movement have shaped the learning and change processes women have implement in community contexts. Black feminism and womanism are closely related to feminism and are both a reflection and a response to the feminist movement. Many of the women involved in this study are African American and the process itself was developed to meet the needs of African American women. An exploration of black feminist and womanist theory may help us understand the learning context for women.

The third part of this chapter will include an analysis of critical race theory. Critical race theory deals with creating structural change in society. The theory looks at the intersection between race and gender and how it impacts women of color, explores



essentialism, and serves as a catalyst for change. Critical race theory will provide us with a means of considering the structures in society that impede the development efforts of grassroots women.

The fourth section looks at emancipatory and transformational learning and the implications of these theories on individual and community change. Emancipatory learning explores change in society that results from the empowerment of people to create social change and transformational learning considers learning that helps people see the world differently. There are interrelationships between emancipatory learning and transformational learning and both are based on processes of dialogue and reflection.

Each of these theories should help us understand communities as a context for learning, community-based learning as a change process for women, feminist and womanist theory and their relationship change, and the potential for transformational learning to create personal and community change. In developing a basic understanding of these theories we can better understand the Circles of Hope as a change process for grassroots women.

### *Community*

I begin this analysis with a discussion about community because in this paper community provides the basic context for learning as well as a framework for understanding how learning can affect change in communities and the broader society. In this section I will explore the relationship between community, development, and education because they are interrelated in community-based education and an analysis of their interdependence will make it possible to better understand how a community-based education program can use education to affect change in their local community. How people define and relate to community will impact how they work to create change

which is particularly important to woman and other groups marginalized by the mainstream society.

Communities are a basic building block of society and provide a context for exploring change—the changes that affect people and their development, the changes that impact how people relate to each other, the changes that shape the culture of a community, and the changes that impact how people learn to create the places that reflect the values and principles important to them.

Communities have been defined in terms of interactions among people. People in communities are living, working, and playing amongst each other in order to meet the needs of their daily lives. In *Democracy in America* (1946), Alexis de Tocqueville discussed community in terms of the villages he saw in the United States. “It is the smallest group occupying a common territory whose bonds are not necessarily of kinship” (Tocqueville, 1946, p. 56). He is careful to point out that community, while it can be small, is broader in scope than family. Phillips Ruop (1953) talks about community as an extension of kinship and kinship relationships.

They (communities) are composed of groups of kith and kin, friends and relatives, living together in the same place, sharing the same fundamental values, and participating in regular activities in which the frequency of personal encounter and interaction is high. ( Ruop, 1953 p. 7)

Hillery (1955) conducted a literature review that yielded 94 definitions of community. In a review of these same definitions Sanders (1958) identified a concept of interaction as a common thread amongst the definitions. He went on to note that interaction included people representative of all the age groups which meant that the programs and services provided by a community needed to meet the needs of the different age groups in the community. Warren (1978) conducted a metanalysis of the

94 definitions of community and found that 69 included social interaction, common ties, and locational criteria as core to defining the concept.

Biddle and Biddle (1965) proposed a broader definition of community stating, "Community is whatever sense of the local common good citizens can be helped to achieve" (p. 77). According to Cook (1985), characteristics of communities include people in the system sharing a sense of the relationships among community members, and an expectation that the community will continue over time. Furthermore, he states that the operation of the community depends, in large part, on voluntary cooperation, a system that is multifunctional, complex, dynamic, and is normally bounded geographically.

Contemporary definitions of community move beyond place as the only context but still include concepts like interaction, common ties, and shared values. Current definitions of communities consider communities of place and communities of interest (Adams, Jeanetta, Leuci & Stallmann, 2004): "Communities of interest are those groups of individuals bound by some single common interest or set of common interests such as leisure interests, civic and special political interests, or spiritual and religious beliefs and affiliations" (Galbraith, 1995, p. 3).

Community has clearly evolved from a place-based concept into one that considers a broad range of human interactions that bring people together including place-based communities and interest-based communities. In addition, definitions of community imply movement towards a concept of the common good. A broad definition based on a community development orientation defines community as "interactions among people for mutual support" (Adams, Jeanetta, Leuci & Stallmann, 2004, p. A5). This definition focuses on relationships among people as foundational to community and builds on some of the same concepts of earlier definitions. Relationships established for mutual support implies that the people in a community come together for the purpose of

supporting one another—an element of the common good concept. Interactions can focus on providing resources all members of the community need such as infrastructure, police, fire, and education—services that are expected in most place-based communities or they can be in the form of support groups, educational clubs, and recreational groups that are more common forms of interest-based communities.

According to Galbraith (1995), a definition of community should include place and interest. He defines community as “the combination and interrelationships of geographic, locational, and non-locational units, systems, and characteristics that provide relevance to and growth to individuals groups and organizations” (p. 4). In this context communities can be as small as a few people or as large as a nation depending on the type of interaction and support the community defines as its own (Batten, 1957).

*Interaction and community.* A fundamental aspect of community as a context for adult learning is how people relate to each other. The German sociologist Tönnies (1887/1957) talks about two forms of interaction in a community context, *gemeinschaft* (community) and *gesellschaft* (society). *Gemeinschaft* is based in relationships in which the parties mutually share in the relationship. That is, people in the community are active members giving and receiving from the interactions. It is a natural process based in shared culture, values, and commitments to the wellbeing of the group. In *gemeinschaft* (community) people remain united even though there are things pulling them apart. Families, churches, and neighborhoods, are examples where people share ownership in the relationships and the interactions necessary to maintain those relationships (Tönnies, 1887/1957).

*Gesellschaft* (society) is comprised of relationships where people relate to one another for specific reasons with few sentiments involved in maintaining the relationships. Privacy and the needs of the individual are very important in *gesellschaft*.

It is a rational process whereby people may work together but do so to advance their own purposes. In *gesellschaft* people tend to stay apart in spite of the things that would bring them together. People are not engaged in the relationships to maintain the greater good but to advance individual aims (Tönnies, 1887/1957). "Gemeinschaft seems most appropriate to bring about a democratic and harmonious process for engaging in lifelong learning opportunities (Galbraith, 1995). However, a *gemeinschaft* approach to adult education may serve to support the existing power structures and relationships and overlook divisions within the community (Brookfield, 1984). There are many different ways for people to learn in a community context. However, the learning will often emphasize the needs of the community rather than emphasizing learning focused on individuals (Stein & Imel, 2002).

Domahidy (2003) identifies two themes that cut across theories of community. One theme concerns how we know community and the other focuses on how we understand the basic nature of community. The perspectives we have based our experiences and understanding of what community is may affect how we relate to community as educators and as participants. Our assumptions about community also affect how we view both what a community is and how we relate to community.

At root, then, questions of theory also raise philosophical questions regarding what we assume about the nature of the world and how we know it. We then act on those assumptions. In most cases we either assume the community is something external to us and to be acted on, predicted and managed; or we are the community and create it through our ongoing processes of interaction. (Domahidy, 2003, p. 78)

Adult education programs in a community context may operate from either assumption. They can be programs in which the people involved in the process are passive participants and view the process that is happening to them or for them; or they can be

programs in which the community embraces learning, is active in the learning process, and are creating programs that reflect their needs and aspirations. One role of an adult educator operating in a community context is to assess in which realm he/she operates.

Mel King (1989) identified two types of communities, the community of the preferred and the community of the oppressed. The community of the preferred is the community of the dominant culture and includes those who already have status and power in the community. Many of the institutions in the community support their existence including the educational system. Those who belong to the community of the preferred have advantages simply because they are who they are. The community of the oppressed includes those who do not belong to the dominant culture. They have disadvantages because they happen to be the wrong race, gender, ethnicity, age, or sexual orientation. They, for whatever reason, do not easily fall into the community of the preferred. According to King these two communities intersect in the marketplace where often the community of the oppressed is exploited for the economic well-being of the community of the preferred (King, 1989).

Often the formal schooling of people perpetuated and reinforced differences and it was in the non-formal community-based education programs in churches, ethnic organizations, and other places formal and informal where the communities of the oppressed learn the things they need to preserve their culture, understand their relationship to the wider community and how to survive in that environment.

*Community development.* Community development is important to our understanding of community because it reflects how people view their relationship to change in community. Will people participate as either activists in their community, working to create and address change on their own terms; or will they be passive participants in the community, willing to accept whatever change comes their way? Community development is typically an activist

orientation to development reflecting the characteristics of the place incorporating aspects of both *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* concepts of interaction. Contemporary views of community development primarily operate on the assumption that we are the community and create it through our ongoing interactions (Domahidy, 2003; Green & Haines, 2003).

Community development can be defined as a planned and organized process through which people and communities learn how they can help themselves. It is a process through which people and communities acquire the attitudes, skills and abilities for active participation in creating meaningful futures and dealing with community issues. (Adams, Jeanetta, Leuci & Stallmann, 2004, p. A6)

There has always existed a tension within the field of community development between those who believe that the process of community change was best managed locally by the people in the community (Biddle & Biddle, 1965; Green & Haines, 2003; & Ruop, 1953) and those who viewed community development as a professional process to be managed or directed by experts (Mezirow, 1961; Sanders, 1958). People in the community were expected to participate in the expert models of community development but control of the process and many of the resources remained with the experts.

The community development process is, in essence, a planned and organized effort to assist individuals to acquire the attitudes, skills, and concepts required for their democratic participation in the effective solution of as wide a range of community improvement problems as possible in an order of priority determined by their increasing levels of competence.

(Mezirow, 1961, p. 16)

This approach to community development puts a lot of control in the hands of those who were providing “assistance” to the community development process and is a reflection of

the big project type of program predominant at the time. It also reflected the view that the process of community development was to address issues and solve problems. Another definition of the same era defined community development as “a social process by which human beings can become more competent to live with and gain some control over local aspects of a frustrating and changing world (Biddle & Biddle, 1965, p. 78). The emphasis is on personal growth through group responsibility for the local common good (Biddle & Biddle, 1965). This definition is different in that the process is entirely local.

Community development has begun to make a shift from a problem solving approach to development towards an asset development model. It is the idea first popularized by Kretzman and McKnight (1993). They surveyed a variety of communities that were under a great deal of stress but were somehow able to be successful in their development efforts. What they found was that in communities experiencing some success the communities were able to see themselves as places with assets that they could cultivate and develop. They found these communities were more likely to be successful than those that only saw their community as a place with problems and issues to address. An asset-building approach to community development was developed by Green and Haines (2003) where they defined community development as “a planned effort to build assets that increase the capacity of residents to improve their quality of life.” Assets are defined as “the gifts, skills and capacities of individuals, associations, and institutions within a community” (Kretzman & McKnight, 1993, p. 25).

Another area of considerable disagreement within community development is deciding who should initiate community development? Should the community be the initiator or should an outside resource or institution be the instigator? There are examples of success from both perspectives. However, there is considerable evidence that community development programs initiated by communities themselves are more



successful over time than those initiated by someone from outside the community (philanthropists, foundations, governments) (Green & Haines, 2003).

Communities provide a basic context for learning and development whether they are place-based like towns, villages, and neighborhoods, or interest-based like professional associations, recreation groups, or civic affiliations. There are many definitions of community but all have at their core an emphasis on human interaction, common values, and mutual support for the common good. Interactions as a basic building block of community can foster mutual interdependence and responsibility to the greater good (*gemeinschaft*) or can focus on relationships as transactions people enter into for personal gain (*gesellschaft*). Community development is a process of creating or addressing change. The process can be externally driven and controlled or internally driven and locally owned.

As we look at community as the context for community-based education we will need to consider what aspects of *gemeinschaft* or *gesellschaft* are appropriate for analyzing the interactions of a community-based education programs. We also need to consider the assumptions we make when entering communities with adult education programs designed to facilitate change. Do community-based education programs work better in communities where the basic assumption is that we need to be engaged and involved in our own development or does it respond better to a more passive group of people where the facilitator plays a more central role?

### *Community-based Education*

Community-based education is the primary theoretical framework for understanding how education can be used in community contexts to create safe places for learning for those marginalized by the mainstream society. This section provides the theoretical foundation for understanding how to approach adult education in a community context with the express purpose of creating change in community that benefits those

marginalized by the broader society within which the community operates. In this section I will look at two approaches to education in a community context, community education and community-based education. They will be analyzed within the context of community developed in the previous section and evaluated based on their capacity to affect change in community.

Community education and community-based education are often used interchangeably in the literature. They both operate within communities but there is considerable evidence that community education programming typically operates better within the existing economic, social and cultural frameworks and is thus less able to respond to issues requiring serious change of those same economic, social, and culture institutions (Corson, 1998; Hugo, 2002). Community-based education operates more on the margins of mainstream economic, social, and cultural norms and is thus more appropriate for working on issues requiring structural change (Hugo, 2002; Young & Padilla, 1990). In this section I will define both, analyze them to see where there are similarities and where there may be differences, and consider how community-based education is used to address change in communities of women.

Some have linked adult education with community development noting that they are often mutually interdependent (Magendzo, 1990; Moore & Brooks, 2000). Community-based education can be part of a community development process as well as an outcome of community development (Moore & Brooks, 1996). A working definition of community-based education needs to function both within a place and interest context and reflect our understanding and assumptions about different communities.

Community-based education is a process designed to meet the unique needs of the community it serves, as a whole and individually.

Community-based education generates and utilizes available resources and skills, as well as those untapped skills and resources, to meet the

varied needs of the community and those of its residents. (Galbraith, 1995, p. 4)

In this definition, development is implied because the purpose is to meet the needs of the community and to utilize available resources in the process. Learning occurs through interaction by engaging the community itself in the development and implementation of the educational process and allows members to define their own participation in the process (Corson, 1998).

Community-based education programs are often closely aligned with liberating or emancipatory models of adult education such as the Highlander Folks School of Myles Horton, and the literacy programs of Paulo Freire (Horton & Freire, 1990). Liberating models of adult education stress addressing issues and disparities that exist in communities and link educational activities with social change (Brookfield, 1985). Community-based education may be an effective approach to adult education in this context because the process of community-based education is closely linked to the needs of the community itself. Those engaged in liberating or emancipatory models are focused on engaging people at the base of the community in a discovery process that empowers them to create their own change (Freire, 1971; Horton & Freire, 1990). According to King (1989) community-based education should include an aspect of consciousness-raising. Helping people understand and analyze those things happening in their community that are barriers to their own development. Once they understand what is happening to them they can ask who is working on this, what they are doing, and how can I get involved in changing this situation (King, 1989). Learning may take place in formal, nonformal, or informal contexts (Galbraith, 1995; Merriam & Brockett, 1997). Later in this chapter I will examine emancipatory models of education and their transformational potential in community contexts.

Values are an important part of community and are reflected in the learning principles adopted by the community in a community-based education program. Communities that are marginalized by the broader society often prefer to learn with others that share similar values and views about the broader society (DeArrudah, 1995). However, in any given community, differences in values amongst those within a community or between communities can be a major source of conflict. For those engaged in community development learning how to negotiate these values-based conflicts can be an issue (McGaughy, 2000).

The Community Development Society (1998) has developed a set of principles that are supportive of community-based education. They include promoting active and representative participation, engaging community members in learning about and understanding community issues, incorporating the diverse interests and cultures of the community in the community development process, disengaging from support of any effort that is likely to adversely affect the disadvantaged members of a community, enhancing the leadership capacity of community members, and capacities of those who participate in programs, and being open to using the full range of action strategies to work toward the long-term sustainability and well being of the community. Galbraith (1995), Decker (2002), and Siemens Ward, (2001) have also developed sets of principles that are not incompatible with those of the Community Development Society. Galbraith (1995) added institutional responsiveness and a reduction of duplication of services. Decker (2002) identified decentralization, integrated delivery of services, and maximum use of resources.

Education efforts are collaborative but sustainable programs are able to gain autonomy (Vacarro, 1990; Young & Padilla, 1990). In a community-based context, the community should be a partner in the education process because it is necessary to have the commitment of ownership from the community in order to sustain a meaningful effort

(Green & Haines, 2003). Thus, effective community-based educational efforts are developed in partnership with the community. The implication is that as educators we bring a resource to the process, but so do others in the community, and the resulting community-based education efforts should reflect the broader interest and input of the whole community if we want that process to develop and grow, effectively address community issues, and sustain itself over time. In this context education is also development.

Stein and Imel (2002) have identified four themes that occur in community learning contexts. Place is important in that the place should foster a neutrality amongst the community members that is owned by the community. The learning content relates to the community's daily life and is connected to its daily concerns. Knowledge is locally produced. The learning is conducted with participants, not for them. The community may become a powerful structure creating privileges of homogeneity because the focus is often on those things people share in the community.

People operating together in communities are integral to civic life in democratic societies and in order for them to function effectively community members must play critical roles in not only understanding the issues they face, but they also need to understand the resources people bring to the community and develop learning opportunities where those resources are explored, developed and bettered utilized within the community (Skopcol & Fiorina, 1999). Exploring the diversity of the community and exploiting the different resources people bring is an important educational goal as well as a learning process (Brooks & Moore, 2000).

In community-based education, facilitators are looking at ways to engage people with each other to better understand what they know and can share as well as to identify what they need to know and learn. Sharing and commitment to relationship building and forging common agendas are important ingredients in developing a community-based

education program (Hope & Timmel, 1995). In the next section I will explore community education, comparing and contrasting it to community-based education.

*Community education.* Community education differs from community-based education. According to the National Community Education Association (NCEA), community education is often associated with the community school—a facility often open beyond the traditional work day for the purpose of providing academic, recreation, health, social service and work preparation programs for people of all ages (NCEA 2004). Definitions of community education often link education institutions such as schools to broader education uses. “Community education is process that achieves a balance and a use of the institutional forces in the education of the people—all of the people—all of the community” (Seay, et al., 1974, p. 6). Institutions are assumed to be purveyors of the public good. Community education may incorporate, adult education, health programs, recreation, vocational education, and the daily K-12 programs. It was designed to make the school the center of activity in the community (Berridge, 1973).

The first model for community education in the United States was developed by Frank J. Manley in Flint, Michigan, and became known as the Mott Program and launched a movement that grew to include 4,344 schools by June of 1975 (Knowles, 1977). The initial program was a response to what was seen as a crisis in Flint, Michigan, which was experiencing many social and economic problems at the time (Brookfield, 1984).

Parson (1976) advocated the development of five basic models of community education. The first was the “no extra bucks no extra bodies” model where the school works closely with existing resources to offer education programs. The second was to work with the community colleges. They could either play a lead role in establishing and operating programs at community schools or they could play a more supportive role. A third option was the recreation/school model where community schools partnered with

local recreation programs to offer programs. The fourth option was the community human resource centers model where the schools served as a central place for offering services to the community partnering with service providers and agencies in the community. The fifth model was the Cooperative Extension model where community education centers staffed by Cooperative Extension staff provided support to community schools (Parson, 1976). One characteristic that all five models share is that the school is the focus of the programming efforts. While leadership in some models shifts away from staff at the schools, the programs themselves are still based in schools and are identified as school programs. In addition, these programs are built on existing structures in the community. They are not necessarily organic responses by community members in response to a perceived need by some segment of the community not already engaged in the broader society. These models still exist today in some form. However, what we are seeing is more diversity in terms of how the programs have changed and evolved in order to meet the changing needs of the schools and communities (Siemens Ward, 2001). For example, in a study of the “school at the center” project in Nebraska, community education was identified as integral to keeping schools open in small, rural communities (Doeden, 2001). In the communities studied, the school was at the center of each community’s development, integrating learning into community planning, leadership development, and community and economic planning.

There are six fundamental tenets of community education

- 1) Mutually supportive relationship between school and community;
- 2) A sharing of facilities between the school and community;
- 3) A community-oriented curriculum;
- 4) Lifelong education;
- 5) Community involvement in decision-making and management of schools;

6) Community development (Nisbet, Hendry, Stewart, & Watt, 1980).

Each of these elements can be interpreted along “a whole range from margin to radical change and can be used to maintain the status quo or initiate fundamental change” (Nisbet, Hendry, Stewart, & Watt, 1980). Community education has also been seen as ranging from a universalist to a reformist concept of community education (Fettes, 1999). A universalist concept of community education is more static, reflects the largest segment of the community, and would therefore be less of a change agent and more oriented to a reflection of the status quo in a community (Fettes, 1999). At the other end of the spectrum is the reformist school which believes schools need to be change agents, involve parents and other community members, and work to create change through dialogue and conflict resolution (Fettes, 1999). However, when schools are evaluated based on their capacity to serve as change agents they have not fared well ((Nisbet, Hendry, Stewart, & Watt, 1980; Wallis & Mee, 1983; Jeffs, 1992; Fettes, 1999).

*Community-based education and community education.* Community-based education differs from community education in several important ways. Community-based education may operate within a place-based or interest-based context, is issue oriented and focused on development, provides a tool for redressing short-comings in the broader society, and serves as a vehicle for social development or creating social capital.

The context for most community education programs is the community school. Some programs are attempting to put the school at the center of community life and others are interested in engaging the schools in the larger society as a resource to address development issues (McGaughy, 2000); many view community education as a way to extend the resources of the school to adults with no particular development agenda. In community-based education the schools are just one of the contexts where community-based education can occur. It can occur in formal education settings such



as schools, community colleges, extension offices; nonformal settings such as churches, nonprofits, neighborhood organizations; and, in informal settings such as among friends, self directed learning, or study circles (Galbraith, 1995).

Many community-based programs that are place-based are often part of broader support systems that are interest-based communities. For instance, the German Mothers Center in Stuttgart, Germany is a community-based education program that is located in an urban neighborhood but it is also part of a larger multi-national community of mothers' centers that provide mutual support to each other (Laux & Kolinska, 2004). What brings these communities together are their common values, interests, and development goals (Laux & Kolinska, 2004; Purushothaman, 1998).

Second, community-based education is often part of a process designed to improve relationships, address social changes, and improve social justice (Hugo, 2002). These types of education programs are often part of a development effort that a community is engaged in to address or create change. This could take the form of a community of Latina women engaged in learning English to improve their economic opportunities (Young & Padilla, 1990), an indigenous community trying to preserve its language and customs (Corson, 1998), or an Australian Aboriginal community using adult education to regain dignity and independence (Randell, 1993). The education is pursued with a development objective in mind that will benefit the community.

Community education programs are part of a liberal education tradition (Brookfield, 1984). They tend to be a societal response (*gesellschaft*) to problems and issues in the community and community-based education tends to be the response of the community (*gemeinschaft*) to its own issues (Hugo, 2002). Schools have universalist tendencies. Their traditions and the experiences of the people associated with the schools (administrators, teachers, students) are steeped in universalist practices, so

even if the school starts with a more reformist agenda the tendency over time will be to revert to a more universalist orientation (Jeffer, 1992).

Community-based efforts often form in response to structural problems within the society in which the community resides (Fettes, 1999). It can be part of a social change process designed to address some forms of oppression such as sexism classism, and discrimination (Young & Padilla, 1990). Community education programs are often a reflection of society and are not adequately positioned to address structural issues (Hugo, 2002). Programs are designed to help people learn what they need to know in order to better compete or achieve in the larger society but rarely are they developed to openly challenge or change a perceived power imbalance. Community-based education programs are often developed to challenge the current educational process and make it more relevant to the communities that live there by providing an alternative to the dominant culture's educational structures and in some cases it may be necessary to establish new structures outside of the normal education channels (Corson, 1998).

There is a social element to many community-based education efforts that are not necessarily part of a community education program and building social networks is often a goal of many community-based education programs (Purushothaman, 1998). Characteristics of a community-based education effort include a focus on developing relationships, bringing together diverse groups of people, and creating programs that develop and benefit a group as opposed to programs for individuals. Community-based education provides a vehicle for marginalized groups to preserve their identity in a society that does not respect those outside of the mainstream and as a result has been a vehicle for adult education used by indigenous groups, minority populations, and women. Women in particular have utilized community-based learning to address a number of issues affecting the development of women.

*Women in community-based education.* Women participate in community-based education for a variety of reasons. One is because it helps them develop their voice so they can speak to issues that impact women (Purushothaman, 1998); another is that many marginalized groups of women are working together to create opportunities for themselves that the society does not offer them individually (Lykes, Mateo, Anay, Caba, Ruiz, & Williams, 1999); others are working on resolving issues that society has long since abandoned (Cirillo, (2000); and some are working to create structural changes in society that address issues impacting women and families (Laux & Kolinska, 2004).

Community-based education occupies a critical space in society for women because it bases learning on the experiences of women and works to empower them to identify and confront those issues which keep them from all the benefits of citizenship in society (Healy, 1996). The educational processes of community-based education are more reflective of the social and cultural needs of women and they actually own the processes themselves. The educational process itself may not look much different than the processes of other community-based groups that are not predominantly women except there is a commitment to gender-based principles, program ownership is female, and the details of the process respect women and their values (Payne-Bell, 1998).

Characteristics and good practices of a community-based education program for women include a woman-centered agenda, community development principles, processes, and practices, promotes community identity, cultivates social inclusion, develops self esteem, builds organizational capacity, and strengthens solidarity networks (Healy, 1996). In Ireland, where “80% of adult education programs are run by women for women”, a study of women involved in community-based education identified the following benefits:

- 1) Strengthening women’s sense of personal identity and motivation;  
developing new skills;

- 2) Increasing understanding of social systems and structures
- 3) Providing opportunities for attaining new educational qualifications
- 4) Developing a sense of community or identity
- 5) Challenging structural and other aspects of inequality, poverty, and disadvantage (Women's Education, Research & Resource Centre, 2001, p. 7)

Clearly, social change, group identity and solidarity, community development, and a focus on women and addressing their particular needs are viewed as both characteristics and benefits of women's community-based education.

Space and safety are important concerns for women in community-based education especially when addressing systemic issues because often there are few places where women can develop themselves without the influences of the broader society negatively impacting what they are trying to accomplish. One organizer of programs for garment workers in Oakland notes, " We provided space for them to develop their leadership abilities so they can organize other immigrant women" (Sen, 1995, p. 36). It was this safe place for women to develop that made it possible for them to discover and develop their leadership capacities.

Safety is critical to women who often do not have their own public places. The German Mothers Center Movement has developed a concept called a public living room (Laux & Kolinska, 2004). All the Mothers Centers have a place where women can come to relax and be themselves away from the normal demands of their lives. This has created a zone of safety that has facilitated lots of creativity and led to the development of numerous programs. Most Mothers Centers incorporate into their space room for education and support (Laux & Kolinska). In addition to the public living rooms, most Mothers Centers have second-hand stores, coffee shops, and some form of child care—things important to mothers (Laux & Kolinska). They look differently from place to place

reflecting the particular culture traits and values of the communities in which they reside. They also provide a sense of familiarity when women go from one center to another. The space has become core to the culture of the women involved in the movement (Laux & Kolinska,).

Programs developed for adults are normally designed to create change in the adult learner. That is to teach them how to be more like everyone else. Too often responsibility for change is placed on the learner without acknowledging that there are things that people need to unlearn that have kept them down in their lives (DeArrudah, 1995). Women in many community contexts see the problems they face as larger than themselves and often problems in the broader society disproportionately affect them. Educational responses need to include support leadership development and action (Payne-Bell, 1998).

In Cleveland, a group of women who began as a support group, incorporated as a non-profit and committed themselves to empowering women by helping women get training and jobs in technical fields (Rogers & Hansman, 2004). Their program had three elements including training and development, leadership development, and supportive services. Once women felt they were ready for work the organization helped them get jobs and provided the support they needed to keep the jobs serving as a bridge between the women and the employers (Rogers & Hansman, 2004). Support in conjunction with education made action possible in this instance.

Palestinian women have found educational change is not likely to happen from within the educational system itself (Fasheh, 1990). The reality for them was such that for more than a generation adults and young people have found their strength, passion, and power in activities outside the classroom. It will not be easy to bring this energy to focus in a classroom setting. According to Munir Fasheh (1990), from the Turner Institute of Community Education, east Jerusalem:

We need an education that will not impose obsolete, ready, fixed, or irrelevant mental maps of reality on people, but that will help people clarify and develop maps that reflect, as accurately as possible, the world around them and that can help them transform their conditions. (p. 32)

Meeting these types of expectations can be difficult for any community; however, in times of rapid change, meeting these expectations may prove impossible for most institutional models. They simply do not respond that quickly. One of the promises of community-based education is it may be more responsive because the people themselves are involved in its development.

Education is a means to an ends and a process of change for many people. It is also a tool for addressing some of the inequities of the larger society. Community-based education can provide a vehicle for developing voice that they can use to articulate their issues in the larger society and provides a safe place to preserve and develop the traditions important to them. Community-based education can also accommodate diversity, provide a vehicle for social transformation, and the development and exercise of local power.

Feminization of learning is possible in a community-based learning context which is attractive to many women who feel marginalized in other learning environments. Women and people of differing cultures, religions and ethnicities are attracted to community-based education because it is community driven creating space where they can establish norms based on their values and cultures. It can be an empowering process for women who are not able to get what they need from the broader culture.

#### *Womanist Theory, Feminism and Women in Development*

The Circles of Hope process is an African American gender-based process for creating change for women in a community context. Feminism is the primary theoretical framework for creating change in society that benefit the development needs of women.

Womanism and black feminism are feminist theories important to African American women and other women of color. This is important because the women involved in this study drew on these theories in the construction of their educational process. They have experiences as African American women that shape not only what the developed agenda should be but also what the priorities should be in the implementation of that agenda. An understanding of feminism, womanism, and black feminism and how they relate to each other will make it possible to better understand how gender perspective shapes how women, mostly women of color, create change for themselves and their community.

Womanist theory and black feminism are concerned with how race, class and gender work together as oppressive forces (Feifer & Maher, 2003; Taylor, 1998).

Three central points support womanism. First, womanists understand that oppression is an interlocking system, providing all people with varying degrees of penalty and privilege. Second, they believe that individual empowerment combined with collective action is key to lasting social transformation. Lastly, they embody an humanism, which seeks the liberation of all, not simply themselves. (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002, p. 72)

Black feminism and womanism grew out of what was considered the inability of the feminist movement to accommodate differences such as race, class, and differing cultural norms and values in their discussions of gender, (hooks, 2000; Hill-Collins, 2000; Taylor, 1998). In this section I will look at feminism and its relationship to community and race, and analyze how black feminism and womanism developed in response to feminism and the challenges both face in representing the needs of African American women as they organize in community to improve their lives.

*Feminism.* Defining feminism is a difficult endeavor because there are many different interpretations and perspectives on what it means to be a feminist and/or practice feminism (Offen, 1988). Some scholars believe that the lack of a definition is a source of its attraction and to narrow its scope to a single definition would be a way of stripping feminism of its vitality (Randall, 1985). Thus, there is little consensus in the literature around what it means to be a feminist.

It is not the intention of this paper to explore all the different possible viewpoints that define feminism but to look at how feminism represents a movement of women interested in creating social and political change that reflects the needs of women. Feminism has historically been about creating change whether it be women advocating for change at the margins of society, enabling them to create new spaces for themselves within the existing social structures, such as advocating for equal pay and access to education and jobs (Howe, 1998; Lister, 2003; Seitz, 1998); or, whether it be radical social change that focuses on redefining society or creating separate social structures that reflect women and their needs (Barrett, 1984; Dunbar, 1978; Thompson, 2001).

The feminist movement struggles to find a place for all women who want to participate. It is a movement that relies on the shared experience of being a woman and how they as feminists can use that shared experience to shape society (Snitow, 1990). In this analysis I will look at feminism as a movement of women that looks to create social change but struggles to define itself in a way that is inclusive of the differences of the women who would be feminists—the tension between universality theories of the experience of being a woman and multivocal theories of women's experiences (Harris, 2000). We will look at how feminism is shaped by the tension between finding a common definition that will accommodate all and providing the space women need to explore their differences.



Feminism was coined as a term in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in France and was linked closely to notions of equal rights for women (Offen, 1988). Voet (1998) describes three important periods of feminism in the United States. The first is what she referred to as a proto-feminist period, where much of the thought about women as deserving of equal status as men with the same rights and responsibilities was initially developed. During the late 18<sup>th</sup> century some of the thinking regarding women's rights were developed in response to Rousseau's *Emile*, where he argued that the purpose of a woman's life was (and should be) to serve and entertain men, educate them when they are young, and take care of them when they are grown up (Voet). This was the predominant societal view at the time and women such as Mary Wollenstoncraft who in 1792 published, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, argued for equal rights for women and called for the education of women the same as men and to cultivate the potential of women to contribute to the broader society—radical thinking for the time (Fraser, 2001). While much of this happened prior to the actual beginning of feminism, it was the work of women like Mary Wollenstonecraft, that provided the impetus and thinking that lead to a feminist ideal (Voet).

The second period is what is referred to as the first wave of feminism. The first wave included the activities of the suffragists culminating in the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment, in 1920, which guaranteed to women the right to vote (Taylor, 1998; Voet, 1998). The period of the suffragists was also the first period marked by organizing for the development of human rights and was considered the American contribution to the development of woman's human rights (Fraser, 2001). In addition to woman's suffrage organizing and education also focused on articulating issues related to women's health and employment.

The third period is referred to as the second wave of feminism and became evident in the late 1960s culminating in a number of anti-discrimination laws in the 1970s

such as Title VII and Title IX of the civil rights act (Fraser, 2001; Taylor, 1998). Title IX of the education amendments required all education institutions to end discrimination against women and girls (Fraser, 2001). During this period an emphasis was placed on developing an agenda that focused on increasing the women's individual freedoms. Many of the gains made during the second wave of feminism disproportionately affected wealthier, educated, white women who dictated the agenda of the feminist movement (Grahame, 1998; hooks, 2000; Taylor, 1998). This fed the perception among women of color that the feminist movement was racist and not concerned with the intersection of race, class, and income with gender (Feifer & Maher, 2003; hooks, 2000).

There is also a fourth period or third wave of feminism underway which began in the late 1980s and is still prevalent in feminism today. This period is an attempt to diversify the feminist movement and to address what some see as shortcomings in feminist theory as well as the historic documentation of both the first and second wave movements of feminism (Feifer & Maher, 2003; Grahame, 1998; hooks, 2000; Taylor, 1998). For instance, the first and second wave feminist movements have deep roots in the abolitionist movement and the civil rights movements that preceded the first and second waves of the feminist movements (hooks, 1990; Taylor, 1998). African American women played important roles in the abolitionist movement, the first and second wave feminist movements, and the civil rights movement. Their contributions are often unnoticed or undervalued in the mainstream feminist movement, exacerbating relations between African American feminists and the white feminist leadership (Childers & hooks, 1990; hooks, 2000; Springer, 2002; Taylor, 1998).

In defining feminism from a historical perspective, Offen (1988) identifies two competing strands of feminist thought that have shaped feminism since the beginning. One is relational and proposed a gender-based view of society, but maintained the

primacy of a male-female couple as the basic unit of society and the other is the individualist, where the individual is the basic unit of society.

Relational feminism emphasized women's rights as women (defined principally by their childbearing and/or nurturing capacities) in relation to men. It insisted on women's distinctive contributions in these roles to the broader society and made claims on the commonwealth on the basis of these contributions. By contrast, the individualist feminist tradition of argumentation emphasized more abstract concepts of individual human rights and celebrated the quest for personal independence (or autonomy) in all aspects of life, while downplaying, or dismissing as insignificant all socially defined roles and minimizing discussion of sex-linked qualities or contributions including childbearing and its attendant responsibilities.

(Offen, 1988, p. 136)

Contemporary definitions of feminism in the United States tend to gravitate more to the individualist tradition (Voet, 1998). Offen (1989) argues that in fact, the relational views of feminism have the most extensive history and is a more appropriate representation of feminism than a definition that focuses on individual human rights. Critics argue that a relational view of feminism may define women as different from men but does not go far enough towards advocating for changes in society that would end male domination (Cott, 1989; Dubois, 1989). Fraser (2001) presents a more individualist definition of feminism defining it as "the theory of, and the struggle for, equality for women" (p.20).

A broad definition of feminism was put forth by Voet (1998) as she argued for linking feminism to citizenship. "Feminism can be defined as all those ideas and movements that have as their fundamental aim the realization of women's liberation or a profound improvement in women's condition" (Voet, 1998, p. 17).

This definition provides space for a variety of viewpoints about women and their relationship to society. For many feminists this may be too broad and inclusive a definition. For one it does not explicitly address male domination important to many of the more radical elements within the feminist movement. Thompson (2001) in arguing for a radical feminist agenda defines feminism as “ending male domination and creating a human status for women” (p. 12). She notes that foundational to feminism is acknowledging that male domination exists so that it can be challenged and opposed. In her discussion of male domination Thompson defined domination as:

a hierarchical order wherein the interests of some prevail at the expense of the interests of others. It is maintained partly through ideological means to ensure the consent of the oppressed to their own oppression and to provide justifications for maintaining the status quo, partly through the threat and periodic actual exercise of violence. (p. 12)

The notion that all women are oppressed is a source of contention within the feminist movement noting that women with privileges such as higher income, education, and class status are not oppressed in the same ways as those who do not have those same privileges (Childers & hooks, 1990). A related problem with focusing on a definition primarily based in ending male domination is that it leaves little space for those within the feminist movement who would not gain much by ending male domination (hooks, 2000).

Dominance theory, an important element of the feminist movement was a univocal or essentialist theory for describing the woman's experience.

Essentialism invites me to take what I understand to be true of me 'as a woman' for some golden nugget of womanness all women have as women; and it makes the participation of other women inessential to the

production of the story. How lovely: the many turn out to be one, and the one that they are, is me. (Harris, 2000, p. 264)

The feminist movements of both the first and second wave were considered essentialist in that the feminist leadership focused on developing theoretical constructs that supported the universality of a woman's experience. The leading theorists and activists were mostly white educated women that tended to speak from their experience base insisting that their experience and viewpoint was universal and should represent the ideal for all women (Harris).

There are many different strands of feminism that have not been discussed in this section. The purpose here has been to lay out some of the basic tenets of feminist thought and to illustrate that feminism is many different things to different people and differences arose that led to women, particularly African American women to reject what they viewed as the essentialist ideas of the feminist movement and advocate for a black feminism that accounted for the contributions and needs of African American women or the development of womanism which provides a space separate from feminism for African American women to develop theory based in their own experiences and needs. They were interested in including more voices and developing multi-vocal theories of the experiences of women.

bell hooks (2000), a prominent African American feminist, notes that a problem with not having a common definition of feminism is that it becomes difficult for women to identify with feminism and as a result lose interest in it as a political movement. In addition, many common definitions of feminism in the popular press characterize feminism as striving to make women the equals of men. hooks contends that equality with men is not enough for women of lower class poverty groups because it does not address issues of class, race, and income. She argues that race and class issues should be recognized as feminist issues with as much relevance as sexism (hooks). The

inability of feminism to incorporate issues of race and class issues into the mainstream discourse on feminism lead to the formation of separate strands of feminism including black feminism. The tension between the desire and need for women to speak from a universal voice on issues affecting all women and the need to include the multiplicity of voices within the movement is a recurrent theme in feminist theory.

*Black feminism and womanism.* Black feminism and womanism are both empowerment theories related to feminism and arose out of the inability of the mainstream feminist movement to include in their discourse issues of race and class (Feifer & Maher, 2003; hooks, 2000; Taylor, 1998).

During what is referred to as the “second wave of feminism” in the United States African American feminists felt they were not supported by either African American men or the (mostly white) feminist movement and thus formed their own national organization in 1973 called the National Black Feminist Organization to develop an African American feminist discourse and political agenda (Taylor, 1998). Black feminists at that time rejected what feminists were calling “sisterhood”, which was an expression of feminist solidarity around ending male domination and thus bringing about positive change for women (Hooks, 2000). The refusal of the leadership in the feminist movement to acknowledge differences kept women from relating to one another in a common sisterhood, and as a result those women marginalized by mainstream feminist thought had to find their own way. Black feminism was one response.

Sisterhood as expressed by contemporary feminist activists indicated no acknowledgment that racist discrimination, exploitation, and opposition of multi-ethnic women by white women had made it impossible for the two groups to feel they shared common interests or political concerns. (hooks, 2000, p. 50)

Hill-Collins (2000) explores some of the themes in black feminism and relates them to what she calls a “legacy of struggle”. She explores the experiences of being a black woman in a society that does not value African American women and relates ideas of mutual care, love and connectedness to African traditions. “Personal experiences are important in shaping the theory of black feminism because within black women’s communities thought is validated and produced with reference to a particular set of historical, material, and epistemological conditions” (p.230). Personal experience is important because it provides the context for describing what it means to be an African American woman living in a society where being African American is defined by African American men and being a woman is defined by predominantly white, middle class women.

*Womanism.* Alice Walker (1983) coined the term “womanism” and identified the characteristics of a womanist as someone who “appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility...is committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health” (p. xi). Walker was claiming space for African American women and others to reflect on history, religion, economics, sexuality, community, and education, and reconstruct them from a womanist perspective (Thomas, 1998).

Womanism has four elements which first and foremost includes ‘a Black feminist or feminist of color’. Second, is one who ‘appreciates and prefers women’s culture.’ Third, is ‘love’ of culture and ‘self’.

Finally...‘womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender’...implying that ‘womanism has a greater scope’ and ‘intensity’ than black feminism.

(Taylor, 1998, p. 26)

Womanism is very similar to black feminism with two notable differences. First, womanism is a response against feminism whereas black feminism is a response

against the hegemonic leadership and thinking of the broader feminist movement. Black feminists are more interested in broadening feminism to reflect their ideas and to incorporate discussions about race, class, and gender into feminist discourse (hooks, 1990). There are many African American women who respect and support most of what is being described and developed by African American feminists but they reject it because of black feminism's attachment to feminism (Joseph & Lewis, 1981; Taylor, 1998). Simply including the word feminist in describing who they are will alienate a large portion of the African American community (Joseph & Lewis, 1981). In a study where they interviewed a number of working class African American women, Joseph and Lewis (1981) noted that certain aspects of the feminist movement have different meanings for women in the African American community than they do for the white community such as the "helpless female" stereotype. In discussing the political struggles of black women Joseph and Lewis note the black woman's role in the black community is as important as her sexual development. "Black women perceive that feminists want to alienate themselves from men, and Black women will not participate in that effort" (Joseph & Lewis, p. 29).

African American women have viewed feminism as the territory of white women (Joseph & Lewis). They do not typically identify with feminism and the idea of a separateness is a strong negative influence. African American women agree with many elements of feminism such as raising the status of women to that equal of men and equal pay for equal work. The prevalent perception among many African American women is that feminists are interested in developing separately from men and that is disturbing to them (Joseph & Lewis, 1981, Taylor, 1998; Thomas, 1998). African American women would like to preserve a femininity they feel is denied to them in feminism (Taylor).



Another major difference emerging between womanism and black feminism is its stand on homosexuality. According to Taylor (1998), “early Religious Studies scholars who employed the theory, dismissed the possibility of its including a lesbian lifestyle” (p. 27). While this is countered in many writings on womanism there is the possibility that lesbianism will provide a division between womanism and black feminism where the position of black lesbians is firmly entrenched (Taylor).

Womanism is about the development of African American women by interpreting and reinterpreting history and considering the role that African American women have played incorporating race and economics in their discussion of gender (Thomas, 1998). In this regard womanism distinguishes itself from feminism and provides for the development of an African American voice as it relates to gender development and the role of African American women (Taylor, 1998).

Theology is an important aspect of womanist theory. Thomas (1998) notes, that the point of departure for black theology is white racism.

Since white supremacy is a structure that denies humanity to African American people, black liberation theology examines the gospel in relationship to the situation of black people in a society that discriminates on the basis of skin color...First generation black (male) theologians did not understand the full dimension of liberation for the special oppression of black women: this was its shortcoming. To foster the visibility of African American women in black God-talk, womanist theology has emerged.

(Thomas, p. 5)

In addition, to describing where womanist theology can make its contribution, this quote also illustrates how womanist theory is placing itself vis-à-vis the two major sources of oppression for African American women—white racism and African American male sexism. Womanism is providing a space for African American women to develop their

own voice independent of white women and African American men regarding those issues and identities that are important to them and reflect their unique history and view of the world.

Womanism is not without its critics in the African American community. bell hooks acknowledges how many African American women view feminism but she believes that the dialogue should occur within feminism. hooks acknowledges that feminism was originated by white women and that much of the theoretical base of feminism is based on in the experiences of white women. However, she does not think black feminists are best served by creating their own terms and further fragmenting feminism. Instead she would argue that it makes more sense to expand feminist thinking to include a multitude of women's experiences (Childers & hooks, 1990).

hooks (2000) believes that all forms of oppression need to be addressed simultaneously within the feminist movement. The discourse should include all voices and feminist theory and common understanding should emerge from the dialogue. She is concerned that by creating a uniquely African American brand of feminism or womanism that African American women will further distance themselves from society and not participate in addressing the structural issues that need to be addressed that affect all oppressed people. She would like to see discourse opened up and looked at more honestly so that when talking about race we have not only white and African American researchers exploring blackness but African Americans exploring and engaging in discourse on whiteness (hooks, 1990).

Feminism, black feminism, and womanism play an important role in this research because women involved in community-based education and development are often working to confront the issues society places in front of them. They are trying to create space at the community level for women to develop voice and to create change. These

theories attempt to broaden our understanding of what women are thinking about their place in society and the changes that are impacting their development.

Feminism has been a change process that has improved some women's lives but all women have not benefited equally from changes created by the feminist movement. Claims of racism based in essentialist views of what it means to be a feminist have fragmented the movement making it difficult for feminism to speak from one voice on issues important to women. The notion that feminism is the primary source of oppression for women is not the reality for many women of color and lower socio-economic status. They are more interested in the intersection of race and the inclusion of all forms of oppression including race, ethnicity, and class in concert with gender. Black feminists work primarily within the feminist movement to create change and reform within feminism and womanism arose out of a perceived need for African American women to have their own voice outside of feminism.

The issues that are consistent sources of tension within the feminist movement such as the intersection of race and essentialism are issues that play out in community contexts all over the country. A better understanding of these issues can inform our analysis of the Circles of Hope process.

### *Critical Race Theory*

Critical race theory is important to this paper in that it provides a critical look at the systems in which people work to create community change. It explores how culture, institutions, and legal frameworks conspire to the disadvantage of people marginalized by the mainstream culture (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). It is important to this analysis because community-based education programs are often created in response to conditions caused, in-part, by the institutional constructs society puts in place to maintain order. These structures often disproportionately impact women, people of color, and people of lower socioeconomic status and class.

Critical race theory (CRT) explores how institutions, legal and social, exploit race, gender, and class to support the status quo and offers remedies that counter the hegemonic effects of certain institutional controls (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). In this analysis of critical race theory we will look at three areas where theory has been developed that impacts our study of community-based learning. They include the intersection of race, class and gender, structural determinism, and essentialism versus anti-essentialism.

Critical race theory began in the late 1980s as a means of exploring what is known about race and the impact of legal systems on what we know about race and racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

Critical race theory questions the very foundations of liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law...critical race theory contains an activist dimension...it not only tries to understand our social situation, but to change it, it sets out not only to ascertain how society organizes itself along racial lines and hierarchies, but to transform it for the better.

(Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 3).

Critical race theory is an inquiry-based process that questions many of our deeply-held beliefs about race and racial injustice. Valdes, Culp, and Harris (2002) note that there are at least three entrenched beliefs about racial injustice rejected by Critical race theory. The first belief is that if we ignore race it will go away. The second is that racism is caused or perpetrated by individuals not systems. Critical race theory looks at how systems maintain racial injustices. The third is that racism exists outside of other forms of oppression. According to critical race theory you cannot fight racism without also considering sexism, homophobia, economic exploitation, and other forms of oppression or injustice (Valdes, Culp, & Harris).

*Intersection of race, class and gender.* Intersectionality is the examination of race, sex, class, national origin, and sexual orientation and how their combination plays out in various settings (Crenshaw, 1995). Those whose lives include more than one of these identity categories exist at an intersection of a recognized site of oppression (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). In critical race theory, intersectionality is the process of looking more closely at identity and exposing how intersections of identity categories affect people's lives beyond the experience of a single identity. Crenshaw identified two types of intersectionality, structural and political. Structural intersectionality takes into account the multiple layers of domination that can converge in a person's life. A study of battered women's shelters in the minority communities in Los Angeles revealed that to simply address the violence inflicted by the batterer would be of limited value.

Many women of color are also burdened by poverty, child care responsibilities, and the lack of job skills. These burdens, largely the result of gender and class oppression, are then compounded by racially discriminating employment and housing practices often faced by women of color. (Crenshaw, 1995, p. 358)

Political intersectionality looks at how one's situation between two or more different groups can affect one's perspective on the issues and how they should be characterized. African American women, placed between white women and African American men are often not represented well by either women or African American men and find themselves situated between two interests with sometimes opposing views (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). This leads to an intersectional disempowerment where the theories and actions of feminists and civil rights activists are not representative of African American women and even attempts to define racism and sexism are inadequately represented in ways that reflect the experiences, contributions, and needs of African American women (Crenshaw, 1995).

*Structural determinism.* Structural determinism is the idea that our system, because of its structure and vocabulary, cannot redress certain types of wrongs and grievances that impact parts of society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). In critical race theory, the entire structure of legal thought is questioned and analyzed. It is hoped that once we understand how the structures shape what is actually possible, then it is possible to create change that will make innovation possible. Breaking down structural determinism is a way to increase creativity and see beyond what we know as possible. How we tell our stories impacts our ability to create change and in structural determinism the stories that are possible are shaped and influenced by the structures themselves.

Delgado and Stefancic (2000) make the case that the three main indexing systems used by the legal profession in the United States, while designed to expedite research, stifles innovation and leads to researchers telling the same stories over and over again. Delgado and Stefancic believe this is because researchers need to know what they are looking for before they do the research and can only search the systems utilizing predetermined categories. Categories in these systems do not exist that would make it possible to look across cases at themes not already codified. Incremental change may be possible but radical, transformative innovation is difficult (Delgado & Stefancic).

In the United States, issues of equity and equality are often at odds and our structures often favor one at the expense of the other. Our legal system typically supports issues of equality at the expense of equity. Bell (2000) in an analysis of the Brown versus Board of Education decision noted that there was a tension between improving the quality of education and desegregation. Implementation of Brown at the local level only occurred when actions were filed against communities not in compliance (Bell). Since many of these communities were without the resources to pursue their own redress they joined in a number of class action cases. It became clear that certain

aspects of desegregation were going to be fought locally every step of the way. Communities, generally of lower socio-economic status almost always deferred to the legal teams in choosing a course of action and they invariably chose more idealistic pathways that were largely unattainable and did little to improve education for African American children even when other remedies that focused more on developing educational resources and less on desegregation were available (Bell).

*Essentialism versus anti-essentialism.* Essentialism is the process of using the narrative of some individuals within a racial or ethnic group to represent the experiences of all those in the category ignoring or even erasing differences within the category (Gunaratnam, 2003). Deconstructing essentialist ideas about racial and ethnic categories are viewed by some in critical race theory as important first steps in reconstructing ideas about people more reflective of their realities.

Essentialism entails looking for the appropriate unit for social change and analysis (Delgado & Stefancic 2001). In considering social change there is merit in having a group of people with a shared experience that can support a political process. The success of the civil rights movement and the women's movement in creating needed social reforms exemplifies this. However, black women were not well treated by either of these movements though by and large they were supportive and instrumental in both (hooks, 2000; Taylor, 1998).

Essentialist notions of identity politics typically have obscured intra-group differences and as we saw in the discussion on feminism, the needs of African American women were not adequately represented so they either created their own space within the movement or left it all together. In situations where the goal is to end oppression essentialist tendencies can exacerbate issues of oppression when the experiences that are supposed to represent the needs of the group are not representative (Harris, 2000).

Gunaratnam (2003) provides three things to consider when researching race. The first is that a concern with naming race and ethnicity as a means of exploring the oppressive relations of power within these categories risks reproducing race and ethnicity as essentialized and deterministic categories that can reconstitute these same power relations. Researchers need to be able to account for how they do research and what their own socialization and social location bring to the research (Gunaratnam 2003). The second is that there is a relationship between theoretical constructs of race and ethnicity and the reasons why people in their day-to-day lived experiences point to examples where these identities are invoked. People do identify with their racial identities; and these intersections between the theoretical constructs and people's experiences should be explored. Finally, even though theoretical understandings of race and ethnicity are relational there is a desire to place race and ethnicity into categories that can be easily understood and addressed. This can produce policies and programs that are considered "practical" and compartmentalize the needs of people within the racial category or ethnic group. Gunaratanam (2003) argues that "we need to develop research that both recognizes and disrupts essentialism in the ways in which racial categorization can be produced, encouraged, and put to work in research (p. 34).

Critical race theory attempts to breakdown essentialist views of race, class and gender and look for deeper meaning in the spaces between these identities in an attempt to help deconstruct societal understanding about identities. These views misrepresent or at the very least inadequately represent many of the people who live in these spaces between identities. Often essentialist ideals designed to end sexism or racism have had negative consequences for those who exist at the margins or intersections of the identity group.

Society has created structures that disproportionately affect people of color. Intersectionality, structural determinism, and essentialism, are all aspects of society that



make it more difficult for people marginalized by the mainstream society. Understanding how these structures work will make it possible for us to better understand how a change process like the Circles of Hope works in a smaller community context. These systems affect the ability of groups to create change locally. However, changes created locally also begin to address these structures.

### *Adult Learning*

One of the principle theories of adult learning is andragogy, “the art and science of helping adults learn” (Knowles, 1980). Andragogy is focused on those things specific to learning of adults as opposed to helping children learn. Knowles proposed the following assumptions about adult learners: they have a self concept, experience, readiness to learn, an orientation to learning, and motivation to learn. Knowles introduced the concept of adults as the self-directed learner. Self-directed learning builds on the assumptions of andragogy in a process of learning where the learner is in control. Knowles describes self-directed learning as:

Learning in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes. (Knowles, 1975, p.18)

Change is an important element of adult education. Adults often engage in education to change something about themselves, their station in life, employment opportunities, or the community. They embark on a learning process in order to empower themselves to change something or learn how to deal with a change that has occurred in their lives. There are two aspects of change and education that are important to this dissertation, change as it relates to the individual and change as it relates to the community or society.

Knowles considered the principle concern of adult education to be the development of the individual person. Much of his work focused on learning that respected the individual needs of the adult learner and he acknowledged that adults bring experience to their education and the process of educating adults needs to incorporate that experience (1980). One of the principle tools of this type of adult learning that helped distinguish the learning of adults from the learning of children is self-directed learning. Self directed learning has three primary goals, to increase the capacity of the learner to be self directed, foster transformative learning, and to promote emancipatory learning and social action (Merriam, 2001). Within the context of this paper the primary focus of the research will be on the goals of fostering transformative learning and promoting emancipatory learning and social action. Adult education has long been interested in changing society. Lindeman (1989) noted that while people are interested in improving themselves they are also interested in changing the social order. In this context the learning is often considered transformative or emancipatory.

Emancipatory and transformational learning are theories with roots in critical theory. Emancipatory learning is concerned with those things in society that keep people from developing to their potential and looks at processes of emancipation that will change the social structures impeding development (Freire, 1971). Transformational learning is interested in change as well. However, transformational learning looks more closely at change in individuals (Mezirow, 1981). Both processes are dialogic in that much of the learning takes place through dialogue processes and reflections on those dialogues.

*Emancipatory learning.* There are two distinct sets of literature, one dealing with the practice of emancipatory learning and the other developing theoretical constructs based on the practice and/or informs the practice. The practice of emancipatory learning has its roots and inspiration in the work of Paulo Freire (1971) and the theory of

emancipatory learning has its genesis with Jurgens Habermas (1984) and is rooted in the critical theory of Marx and Hegel. In this paper we will look at how the literature of regarding both the practice and theory of emancipatory learning are treated in adult education literature.

Habermas (1984) is widely considered the primary originator of contemporary ideas about emancipatory learning. In his theory of communicative action, he talks about the three broad domains of learning as the technical, the practical, and the emancipatory which correspond to the different aspects of our social lives, work, interaction, and power (Habermas). Habermas considers emancipatory learning as the development of self-knowledge. Self knowledge means to be able to look critically at one's own history and biography and look at how that history expresses itself in how people see themselves, their relationship to community, and the expectations that society places on them (Habermas).

The basic philosophy behind emancipatory learning comes from critical theory with roots in Marxism. Habermas was a member of the Frankfurt school of critical theorists and much of his work comes from his radical tradition. Emancipatory learning is radical in that it sees education as a personal exploration of our concept of self and our relationship to the social structures we live with on a daily basis. The learning process may actually lead to the identification of structural changes needed in society. Habermas (1984) was the first to chart a process of emancipatory learning based in a dialogic understanding of self that included an exploration of the structures in society that dictate our identity. It is through an exploration of these structures and the development of an understanding of how people play out roles in society dictated by these structures that we begin to realize our roles do not have to be pre-ordained by society and that change is possible.

Freire (1971) based his ideas of the emancipatory power of learning in an understanding about how people learned. He challenged traditional subject-object ideas of learning where the learner is simply the receiver of the subject's knowledge. He advocated for a subject-subject mode of learning where the learners in collaboration with the educators created the learning experiences. It is a process of co-learning where the focus of the learning is negotiated between the learner and the educator and the responsibility for learning is shared (Freire).

In his seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1971) articulated a process of conscientização (consciousness-raising) that was incorporated in a literacy program developed with the poor in his home community of Recife, a city in the Northeast of Brazil. The educational process consisted of a dialogue between the educator and the educando (learner) that was a mutual learning experience (Freire). In this educational process the literacy program was framed within a dialogue about issues important to the educando. In Freire's approach to education the educator must have some content that the educando is interested in learning, but the educator also needs to be open to input from the educando who comes to the learning experience with a rich set of resources and experiences that the educator needs to access in order to make the learning valuable to the educando (Freire).

In Freire's approach to education the value in literacy education was based in what literacy enabled people to accomplish. By learning how to read and write, within the context established in the Brazilian program the educandos (learners) were able to express themselves (their concerns and their dreams) around issues important to their lives. As a result, the people who participated in the program better understood the limitations that society placed on them simply because of their status in the community, and in the process they were developing the skills necessary to communicate their concerns and ideas to a wider world (Freire). Through this process of consciousness

raising people became better able to name the limitations that impacted their life and became motivated to try and address these limitations (Freire, 1971). This was a form of emancipatory learning where the emancipation is a result of a transformative learning process.

In his later works, Freire addressed his critics regarding his treatment of gender and discusses broader issues of learning and social change linking them to hope and struggle making a clear linkage between, hope, struggle and education as a tool for bringing about social change or transformation (Freire 1994). He also looked at how emancipatory learning concepts can be used to address issues in general education (Freire, 1998). The process of conscientização is the basic pedagogic foundation for emancipatory learning (Freire, 1971, 1994, & 1998).

Morrow and Torres (2002) present a credible case that while both Habermas and Friere come from different traditions and have different influences their works are complimentary. Both Freire and Habermas were heavily influenced by Dewey, Marx and Hegel. Freire was also heavily influenced by the radical social change element within the Catholic Church in Latin America. However, there is evidence in the early writings of Habermas that he was also aware if not influenced by some of these same writers. Both writers saw shortcomings in critical theory as it relates to learning and social change. Their ideas about emancipatory learning were really attempts to address these theoretical concerns (Habermas) and create a new praxis for learning (Freire) that created a role for people in addressing deep-seated social issues by changing the dialectic between the teacher and the learner (Morrow & Torres, 2002).

*Transformational learning.* Mezirow (1981) began building a theory of transformational learning based on the work of both Habermas and Freire and builds a case for a charter for andragogy based on this analysis. In addition, Mezirow makes the case that through emancipatory learning perspective transformation is possible.

Perspective transformation is the emancipatory process of becoming critically aware of how and why the structure of psycho-cultural assumptions has come to constrain the way we see ourselves and our relationships, reconstituting this structure to permit a more inclusive and discriminating integration of experience and acting upon these new understandings. (Mezirow, 1981, p. 6)

Perspective transformation is usually brought on by a disorienting dilemma that causes people to see the world differently and thus forces them to reconstruct their reality based on this new perspective. Mezirow is not concerned with the societal implications of these kinds of changes nor does he address what happens when groups of people experience this type of disorienting dilemma. His ideas regarding perspective transformation has lead to an explosion of research relating to the transformational effects of learning and emancipatory learning (Baumgartner, 2001; Bennets, 2003; Cranton, 1994; Inglis, 1997; Merriam, 2004; Mezirow, 1981, 1991, & 2001).

Mezirow (1991) attempts to develop a learning theory focused on creating meaning such that adult educators are able to establish a basis for a philosophy of adult education for setting goals, assessing needs, developing programs and research. "For learners to change their 'meaning schemes (specific beliefs, attitudes, and emotional reactions),' they must engage in critical reflection on their experiences, which in turn leads to a perspective transformation (Mezirow, p. 91). In this work he begins the process of establishing a theory of transformational learning based in an emancipatory learning process grounded in dialogue and reflection.

Cranton (1994) adds culture and language to the transformative learning process. She notes that people have their own ideas, views, and perceptions of the world that guide their interpretations of it. Their perceptions are shaped by forces such as culture, language, relationships, and personal insights. Transformative learning is the

process of taking a look at these perceptions and questioning, evaluating, and revising them based on experience or new insights. The influence of culture on meaning is further explored by Bruner (1996) where he discusses how cultural institutions reflect commonsense beliefs about human behavior. He notes behaviorists like Skinner want to explain human behaviors without acknowledging that there are cultural meanings that impact how people behave. Bruner argues that these cultural meanings control our individual acts supporting Habermas' notion of self. Bruner also makes the case that there is no such thing as cultural neutrality supporting the praxis of Freire. According to Bruner, people support the notion of cultural neutrality because the people that reap the benefits of the mainstream culture do not understand the privileges they enjoy simply because of their culture. Since the institutions they encounter on a day-to-day basis reflect their values they do not even consider the possibility that these values are not universally shared. If we acknowledge that culture is an important guide for how we act then many of our conventions about reality, including how we approach research, is suspect unless the impact of culture is considered supporting the case for an emancipatory approach to education and research.

Inglis (1997) challenged the idea that there is a relationship between personal transformation and freedom. He attempts to clarify the nature of power, defines it within the context of a system, and within a system an individual makes the distinction between individuals empowered by the existing system and those struggling for freedom by changing the system. In the latter case personal transformation may actually be a problem for some individuals because unless the system changes there are few ways to fully realize the personal power they have developed for themselves through their personal transformation.

Emancipatory learning has been broadly connected to a number of ideas and movements. Hewitt (1989) is interested in the interaction between self and society. The

theory is called symbolic interactionism. Hewitt looks at self, identity, conformity, differentiation, and community. Symbolic interactionism is an exploration of culture and the tension between community and society. He makes connections between symbolic interactionism and ideas of emancipatory learning. It has been linked to social psychology by Howard and Hollander (1997) in their work on gender differences. They argue that gender differences are not natural but that they are constructed through social processes. They point the way to more nuanced and sociological understanding of the intersections between individuals and the societies in which they live. Emancipatory learning processes may play a role in addressing the constructs that lead to these differences.

bell hooks (1994) looks at barriers to education for people of different races and cultures. Her perspective is that people who are not part of the dominant culture face barriers in education that put them at a disadvantage. She reviews educational theory and discusses approaches to education that are learner-centered and build on the advantages that a multicultural classroom or community presents. She is heavily influenced by the work of Paulo Freire and has written a chapter on how his work has influenced her thinking about education (hooks, 1994).

The relationship between emancipatory learning and community change still has a lot of room for exploration and research. Moore and Brooks (1996) build a case for community transformation based on the work of Mezirow and Freire. They describe a process of transforming community through development and suggest a process for creating economic development in communities by combining strategies of change that involve involving community members in the development.

Peter Mayo (1999) in his research on Paulo Freire made a compelling case that transformational learning played a limited role in the movements he studied and he articulates a process that tries to bring their ideas into a more contemporary light. This



work may be of some use to community-based organizations. However there are relationships between transformational learning and others types of community change that have yet to be effectively evaluated and could have a powerful impact on the communities of the future.

### *Chapter Summary*

This chapter reviewed the key theories that shape an understanding of the Circles of Hope process within the context of community-based learning. I reviewed the literature of four theories that will contribute to this understanding. The first was an analysis of community, placing community-based learning within a broader understanding of community and community development. The second was an exploration of feminist, black feminist and womanist theories and their approaches to creating change for women in society. The third was a review of the concepts of critical race theory that explain how society oppresses certain groups and classes of people. The final section was an analysis of transformational and emancipatory learning which provide both frameworks and methods for creating personal and community change.

Community is the basic context for the work of the Circles of Hope educational process. The literature provided a number of definitions of community most of which defined it in terms of the interactions of people and their systems of support. Tönnies (1887/1987) identified two broad types of human interaction, that of *gemeinschaft* (community) and that of *gesellschaft* (society). Domahidy (2003) noted that people's interactions with community are assumed to something internal to us that we interact with or as external to us and something we act on. Community-based learning shares some of the characteristics of community that Tönnies described such as a common set of norms and values and *gemeinschaft* was identified as the preferred interaction for community-based learning (Galbraith, 1995).

Community-based learning is an educational process with roots in community theory and community development. The purpose of community-based learning is to meet the needs of the community served, implying a development function and a role in creating change (Moore & Brooks, 1996) and is often identified with emancipatory models of education (Galbraith, 1995; Merriam & Brockett, 1997).

Community-based learning was contrasted against community education and several differences were noted. Community education is based in schools and is viewed by many as a way of extending the school into the community or making the school the center of the community (Doeden, 2001). In community-based education schools are just one of the contexts in which programs can take place. Community education tends to be a societal response to community issues and community-based education tends to be a community response to its own issues (Hugo, 2002). Community education programs are designed to help people learn what they need to know to compete in the broader society and community-based education is often used as a tool for challenging or changing a perceived power imbalance (Corson, 1998).

The feminization of learning is possible in community-based learning and it has been used as a process to successfully create change for communities of women in which they were able to determine the change they wanted and participate in the development of their own educational process (Cirillo, 2000; Corson, 1998; Fasheh, 1990; Laux & Kolinska, 2004; Lykes, Mateo, Anay, Caba, Ruiz, & Williams, 1999; Young and Padilla).

Feminist, black feminist, and womanist literature provides a framework for how women have organized to create change for women. Feminism has a rich history of creating change in society dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and has culminated in two waves of change in the United States. The first wave was during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and resulted in the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment, in 1920 giving women the right to vote (Taylor,

1998; Voet, 1998). The second wave followed the civil rights movement of the 1960s and resulted in federal laws improving access to education and the workplace in late 1970s. The failure to get the equal rights amendment adopted was also a legacy of this period (Fraser, 2001). While there have been some major successes from the feminist movement the success did improve the lives of all women equally and tended to benefit white, educated women more than others (hooks, 2000). The black feminist movement and womanism were both responses to feminism's unwillingness to address issues of race, ethnicity and class (hooks, 1990; Taylor, 1998; Springer, 2002). Black feminism and womanism are similar in that they are both based in feminism, have similar goals for African American women, and include race, ethnicity, and class in their agenda. The principle difference is that black feminism works within feminism to advance the interests of people of color and womanism is an alternative to feminism for people of color (Taylor, 1998).

The analysis of critical race theory considered how essentialism, intersectionality, and structural determinism worked to impede the development of women of color. Essentialism is the process of using the stories of a few people within a racial or ethnic group to represent the experiences of all those in the category ignoring differences within the category (Gunaratnam, 2003). This was the experience of many African American women in the feminist movement. The experiences of the elite, educated white women were used to describe the needs of all women. Intersectionality is the examination of race, sex, class, national origin and how their combination affects how people experience oppression (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). African American women experience intersectionality because of their race and gender and their issues are not well represented by either their race or their gender. Structural determinism considers how the structures and vocabularies used in society work to oppress people that do not have access. Understanding how the structures work against people can help them

begin a process of breaking down those structures. Critical race theory provides a basis for understanding how society works against certain groups in our society.

Emancipatory learning and transformational learning are approaches to creating change. Emancipatory learning is grounded in the theory of communicative action developed by Habermas (1984 & 1987) and is a process of looking critically at one's own history and how a person's history manifests itself in his/her relationship to community and societal expectations. Freire (1971) challenged how people learned and believed that through a dialogic process whereby the learners are engaged in a dialogue with facilitators that help them explore the conditions that impede their development they will be able, through a process of consciousness raising, to become empowered to create societal change. Transformational learning provides a framework for understanding how adult education can be used to create personal change and emancipatory learning provides a framework for understanding and creating societal change.

Each of these theories provides some context for understanding the Circles of Hope educational process as a method for dealing with change based in the needs of the women. They each provide a piece of the puzzle in terms of understanding the contexts, rationales, and philosophies that guide the analysis of the learning process. In this chapter I have defined community as a context for learning and community-based learning as a change process for women; explored feminist and womanist theory and their relationship change for African American women; evaluated critical race theory and analyzed how in terms of its contribution to an understanding of the challenges people of color face when working for societal change; and explored the potential for transformational and emancipatory learning to create personal and community change. Taken together these theories offer a broad framework for analyzing and understanding Circles of Hope.

### Chapter Three Methodology

This study was conducted using a qualitative research process using a case study analysis. In this chapter I will explore the rationale for selecting qualitative research methods for this study, outline the research and analysis process, discuss the group of women who were involved in the study, and situate my own socio-cultural context in relation to the research. I interview seven women involved in the Circles of Hope and conducted a focus group that included five of the seven women. A case study was developed for each of the seven women based primarily on transcribed audio recordings triangulated with focus group data, organizational records, and interview notes. The six case studies provided the basis for a cross-case analysis used to see what could be learned by looking across the cases: What did their stories share that could be used to begin a theory-building process based on the experiences of these seven women?

The focus of this research was to explore the experiences of seven women who have been participants in Circles of Hope, a gender-based dialogue process designed to help women address changes in their lives and in their communities. Through the experiences these women shared, I gained a better understanding of how such grassroots processes help facilitate change from the perspective and in the words of the women participants. The three main elements of a Circle are education, action and support. These elements work in tandem to create a safe environment for learning and creating change. The process is one of social transformation—that is through this educational process women are able to empower themselves to address the issues affecting their own personal development, thus making it possible to transform themselves, their families, and communities.

### *Research Question*

The purpose of this research was to gain a better understanding of how participation in Circles of Hope changes the lives of the women who participate in this educational process. Implicit in this question is the assumption that change has occurred as a result of their participation. I explored two aspects of this change process. 1) How has participation in the process changed them personally? and, 2) How have these women become engaged in creating change in their families and communities? I was interested in their personal stories and constructed meanings. Through their stories I developed a better understanding of the change process as they experienced it, how the process impacted them personally, and how they were able to apply what they learned in their families and communities.

### *Sample*

The seven women interviewed are all members of WomanSpirit and have been part of the organization for at least three years. There are about 30 women regularly involved in WomanSpirit so the sample represented about 20% of the regular membership. They have participated in multiple Circles of Hope processes although some have participated more than others. Most of the women have been continuously active in the organization, participating in many of the activities and serving in leadership roles; others participated sporadically, participating in the organization for periods of time and then drifting away to return again later. It was my intention to interview a diverse cross-section of the organization's membership.

Most of the women involved in the organization are over 50, not regularly employed, and African American. Some spent time on welfare; others are single parents or grandparents raising children. One received a Masters degree and the others are well educated. They have all had some college experience. What they shared as a group was a commitment to each other, the Circles of Hope process, and the principles

that guide the work of the organization. Table 1 describes the participants based on age, income, and employment status.

Table 1: Background Characteristics of the Participants

	Founder	Facilitators			Participants		
	Makeda	Aeshe	Debbie	Danielle	Obie	Gene	Elizabeth
Age (check one)							
Under 25							
25 to 35							
35 to 45			v				
45 to 55				v	v		
55 to 65	v					v	v
65 and Over		v					
Annual Family House hold Income (check one)							
Less that \$14,999	v	v					
\$15,000 to \$24,999				v			
\$25,000 to \$34,999					v		v
\$35,000 to \$44,999							
\$45,000 to \$54,999						v	
Over \$55,000			v				
Employment Status (check one)							
Employed			v	v			v
Unemployed							
Student							
Retired		v					
Medically Retired	v				v		v

The participants in this study have a variety of experiences that impact their development. Some of these experiences such as education and owning a home may improve their personal development options and others such as a physical disability may negatively impact their development options. The data in Table 2 identifies the participant's personal status around factors that can affect their ability to engage in development.

Table 2: Personal Status, Educational Attainment, and Professional History

	Founder	Facilitators			Participants		
	Makeda	Aeshe	Debbie	Danielle	Obie	Gene	Elizabeth
Physical Disability (Yes or No)	Yes	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Child-rearing Activities (Yes or No)	Some	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Maintain Own Home (Yes or No)	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Live Alone (Yes or No)	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Years of Education	14	15+	17	13	16 +	14	12 +

There are two sets of principles that inform the work of the organization and guide the actions of the women. The first set comes from the National Congress of Neighborhood Women (NCNW) and second are the principles of Kwanzaa, the African American and Pan African holiday celebrated around the world. The principles of NCNW include an emphasis on a values-based process, empowerment, economic self-determination, women's leadership, families, support groups and networks, working in coalitions, diversity, and health and well-being (Payne-Bell, 1996). The principles of Kwanza include unity, collective work and responsibility, self determination, purpose, cooperative economics, faith, and creativity (Karenga, 1998). These principles are reflected in the work they do, the programs they develop, and the people and organizations with whom they collaborate.

#### *Data Collection*

This project used qualitative research methods for gathering and analyzing data. Qualitative research is:

The nonmathematical process of interpretation, carried out for the purpose of discovering concepts and relationships in raw data and then



organizing these into a theoretical explanatory scheme...it is research that attempts to understand the meaning or nature of the experience of a person. (Corbin & Strauss, 1998, p. 11)

In this project I was not concerned with measuring change even though change clearly took place. I was more interested in understanding the change that had been taking place as described by the women involved the change process. I did this by engaging with women who have participated in the process, I explored their experiences in a dialogue that encouraged them to share their perspectives and give voice to their learning.

There is a richness of meaning and purpose that comes from the words of the participants themselves that can only be captured in a qualitative research design:

Qualitative research seeks answers to questions by examining various social settings and the individuals who inhabit these settings. Qualitative researchers then, are most interested in how humans arrange themselves and their settings and how inhabitants of these settings make sense of their surroundings through symbols, rituals, social structures, social roles and so forth. (Berg, 2001, p. 6)

Circles of Hope is a process that includes all these elements. In order to gain an understanding of the process and its impact on the women who participate in the Circles, it was necessary to look at how place, process, people, and social structures work together to create a learning environment that facilitated the changes desired by the participants. Qualitative research, by engaging the women in an exploration of their own experience, offered me a glimpse of their reality and contributed the development of an understanding of each woman's unique experience that was not accessible in quantitative studies.

In a search for understanding, the qualitative or narrative approach to research offered opportunities to explore, in intimate ways, the experiences of these seven women. Understanding the change process in small local groups made it possible to map the characteristics of the process and explore how such the process worked to facilitate change within women's groups. Developing a deeper understanding of the process and women's perceptions of the process revealed an number of issues and patterns that could then be measured from a quantitative perspective that I will discuss in Chapter six.

A case study approach was used as the principle means of organizing and collecting the data in this study. Case studies are useful "to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved" (Merriam, 1998, p.19). A case study approach offers an appropriate framework for conducting and analyzing interviews, because it provides a framework that focuses on exploring the experiences of individuals (Stake, 2005). In this kind of framework, it was possible to look at the seven women's own interpretation of their reality and experience.

Stake (2005) identifies three types of case studies. The first is the intrinsic case study, which is the study of a particular case where the interest is focused on learning as much as possible about that particular case. A case can be an individual or an organization. The second is the instrumental study, where a case is studied to develop an understanding of an issue or phenomena. The third is the multiple case study which is the instrumental case study extended to many cases. In this study I conducted an instrumental case study of each of the women involved in the Circles of Hope process. After completing a case study profile of each of the women I drew from the multiple case study approach to see what could be learned by looking across the cases.

In this research a person's voice is important. I tried to explore the experiences of each woman in a way that allows her individual voice to be heard and explored. I

interviewed the seven women one at a time in order to gain a better understanding of their experiences in the educational process and how it changed their lives. Each interview was treated as an individual case study where each participant shared her experiences and perceptions of the Circles of Hope process.

*Interviews.* The principle means of data collection was through an interview process. There are three basic types of interviews the informal conversational interview, the general interview guide approach, and the standardized open-ended interview (Patton, 2002). The informal conversational interview is highly unstructured and normally has no pre-determined set of questions to guide the interviewer. The questions result from the context and interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee (Patton). The interview guide is based on a list of questions that the interview prepares ahead of time to ensure that the same basic topics are covered by each person interviewed. Within each of the questions or topic areas conversations and spontaneous questions are explored but the guide ensures that all the basic topics and questions are covered with each interviewee (Patton). The standard open-ended interview is more specific. Each question is carefully developed beforehand to ensure that all the interviewees receive the same information and many of the questions include a number of details designed to ensure that each interviewee gets the same question in the same manner as other interviewees (Patton). In this study the interview guide approach was utilized.

Interviews were held at the Imani Family Center during July and August of 2005. The location was selected to ensure that the participants were able to feel safe and freely participate. Each of the women selected a pseudonym for themselves. The pseudonyms were used order to protect their identification. The Imani Family Center is located in St. Louis, Missouri, and is operated by WomanSpirit. They conduct most of their dialogues and other programs at this facility. One of the issues women face in

inner city neighborhoods is the scarcity of safe places for people to meet. Imani is safe because it is owned and operated by the women who use it; they have established ground rules that all visitors must respect, and they have created an environment that is a home away from home. There are two buildings. One used to be a church rectory and the other was a convent. The church rectory has a computer lab, kitchen, offices, and two meeting rooms. The rectory is where most of the work and programs are conducted. The second building is a convent which they use primarily for special events and projects. It includes, meeting rooms, bedrooms for eight people, offices, a kitchen, recreation room, and a public living room. The interviews for all seven women were held in the same room, one of the meeting rooms in the old rectory building. The room was comfortable. It used to be a screened in porch so there are windows on three sides with a fireplace on one wall. The interviews were held in June and it was warm in the room but a window air conditioner kept it comfortable.

The Imani Family Center plays a unique role in the community in that the members of the organization share in its ownership and operation. The resources to acquire the property were gained through the work of the organization, contributions by members and the generosity of allies in the broader community including religious orders and personal contributions. They have created a safe and trusting environment where the participants feel safe to share their ideas and experiences.

The women who will participate in the study will represent a cross section of the community who participate in WomanSpirit. All of the women are regular participants in the Circles of Hope process. Three of the women describe their participation as primarily that of facilitator. That is they often find themselves serving as the facilitator of the Circles of Hope process. The other three may occasionally facilitate but prefer to define their relationship to the process as that of a participant. The seventh is the founder of the organization and principle author of the process. She is primarily a facilitator of the

process but because of the close association with the design of the process she was considered separately from the other three facilitators. The women varied in terms of age, income, employment and marital status, relationship to the process, and time involved in the program. Six of the women are close to the seventh. Their relationship to the process was initiated primarily because of their relationship to her. They were active members with an interest in sharing their stories. I wanted to hear from the active leadership of the organization, the founders, staff, older participants, younger participants, African Americans and differing educational levels. The primary focus was experience with the process. Each person selected brought several of these characteristics to the process. In total, the seven women included all of the above characteristics. However, the women tended to be mostly older and educated.

Each subject was interviewed once for approximately 90 minutes using a semi-structured interview format. The semi-structured interview included a series of questions designed to get the subject to talk about her participation in Circles of Hope and how it has changed them personally and change their relationship to their community (see Appendix A).

It had been my experience in observing the women in this organization that people come and go as they have time and the need for the community offered by WomanSpirit. I wanted to better understand how they got involved in WomanSpirit, participated in the Circles of Hope process, and the extent to which they attribute changes in their lives and communities to their inclusion in a Circle. Each interview was recorded using a digital recorder and was transcribed verbatim and coded. During the interviews I took notes but focused on staying engaged with the women. I was interviewing in order to facilitate the dialogue. I took approximately one hour after each interview to record or note my perceptions of the interviews, document what I saw and felt as well as what the participant said.

*Focus group.* Once all interviews had been transcribed, a focus group was conducted with five of the seven women. Focus groups are essentially “group interviews” that allow a researcher to gather data from the focus group interview process through the transcribed text of the dialogue and observations of the interactions of the group in hopes of gaining insight that are not necessarily available through an individual interview (Morgan, 1997). Focus groups have three basic uses in social science research:

First, they are used as a self-contained method of study in studies in which they serve as the principal source of data. Second, they are used as a supplementary source of data in studies that rely on some other primary method such as a survey. Third they are used in multimethod studies that combine two or more means of gathering data in which no one primary method determines the uses of the others. (Morgan, 1997, p. 2)

In this study the focus group data was supplementary. The data collected from the focus group was triangulated with the interview data, personal interviews, researcher notes, and organizational records to provide a complete and accurate portrayal of each case.

“The intent of a focus group is self disclosure among participants” (Krueger & Casey, 2000, p. 7). The interaction of the women in the focus group allowed them to introduce specific shared experiences into the research process. In the focus group the interaction and sharing enriched the stories that they told in the interviews and revealed some additional insights about each other and the group dynamics not possible without the interaction.

The focus group was held at the Imani Family Center, recorded with a digital recorder using a multidirectional microphone system. It was transcribed verbatim, and

last approximately 90 minutes. The focus group was conducted once all the individual interviews were done and a preliminary analysis had been conducted. The preliminary analysis of the interviews informed the focus group process. After analyzing the individual interviews and the focus group data I conducted short follow-up interviews with two of the women over the telephone to clarify statements in the transcribed record.

### *Data Analysis*

As each interview was transcribed, an initial reading of each transcript was conducted. On the second reading, I began coding the text according to the themes I saw emerging in the text of each interview. After the text of each interview was coded they were organized according to the themes. Only complete passages were moved so that the context of the text was not altered. Each theme was read and reread looking for consistencies in the text. The focus was on building a case study for each woman that described her experiences in a way that consistently reflected what she communicated in her interview.

A cross-case analysis was employed to see what can be learned by comparing across the case. It is a methodology that allows for examining, identifying, and highlighting similarities and differences across cases that share a comparable profile regarding the area of analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1984). In this study, a key analytic framework was to examine change across three themes, the process experience, personal growth and change, and their engagement in community as they address change. By analyzing within and across the cases I was able to identify and discuss the experiences that the cases shared in common and that distinguished them from each other. This was used as a way to beginning the process of building a theory of adult learning based on the experiences of these women with Circles of Hope.

The initial focus was on developing a case study for each woman and articulating an understanding of each case before engaging in a search of patterns and themes that

the cases shared. This helped to ensure that the patterns that emerged among the cases were based in the specific cases and contexts (Patton, 2002). There was at least one week between the coding of each case. This was done to try to limit the impact the coding of cases earlier in the study on the cases coded later in the study. By looking across the six cases I was able to identify themes that the women shared and some that distinguished each person providing a deeper understanding of their experience, what that experience meant to the women, and the themes among the cases that need further research.

The cross-case analysis served as the basis for a theory building process based on the experiences of the seven women in this study. Grounded theory was used as the framework for constructing the theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1998). Grounded theory is a theory building process that begins with a set of data and allows the theory to emerge from an analysis of the data rather than starting with a theory and testing its validity (Corbin & Strauss, 1998).

### *Researcher Impacts*

Jerome Bruner (1991) makes the case that values are important to research and that meaning is inherent in these values. In this dissertation I will explore the stories of women, mostly African American, who conveyed to me, through their stories, certain values and they expected that I was able to find the meaning that they wanted me to find through their stories. They communicated what was important to them. I am a white, educated, working man with a different set of values and understandings about the world and I am sure that influenced my interpretation of the meanings being conveyed through their stories. I am qualified to interpret the meaning in the stories of these women but my interpretation is reflective of who I am and the values important to me.

I have a long history with WomanSpirit. It began in 1996 when I met the executive director at a course I was facilitating. She was invited to spend part of a day



sharing her experiences in addressing issues of poverty. I was later invited to see their facility and explore ways that we could work together in addressing community development issues. I have used my relationship with WomanSpirit to learn how the organization I work for, University of Missouri Extension, can make its resources more available to a small community-based organization like WomanSpirit. It has made me a better educator. WomanSpirit has used its relationship with me to figure out how to access the resources the University of Missouri has that can benefit a small community-based organization. In the process we have worked together on a number of projects.

There have been benefits to the University of Missouri in my relationship with WomanSpirit. For example, in 2002 I was asked to help host the visit of Dr. Wangari Maathai to Missouri. Dr. Maathai is the founder and director of the Greenbelt Movement in Kenya. She is a member of the Kenyan parliament and was the recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004. As a result of my assistance, she spent a day on our campus visiting with faculty, administrators, and students. Our relationship has also benefited WomanSpirit. In addition to the technical assistance resources that the organization is able to access through the University of Missouri, WomanSpirit is able to use a relationship with the University of Missouri to legitimize the organization's work in the broader community. This is important in garnering support from foundations and other organizations that can provide the support needed to develop their work.

Other universities and community-based organizations have been interested in how our relationship has developed and has worked over the years. Universities want access to community-based organizations, and community-based organizations want to learn how to access the resources of universities without losing their identity in the process. The executive director and I were invited to Germany in October, 2004, to facilitate a dialogue process with the German Mothers Center, other community organizations, city government, and business. There were 75 people who participated in

the dialogue. The Germans wanted us to facilitate the dialogue process and to model a collaborative working relationship between a university and community-based organization.

My relationship with the organization affects what I hear and how I interpret the stories that the women share with me. It is possible that I inadvertently misinterpreted or read into some of the stories that were shared with me meanings that were not necessarily part of the story because of my prior knowledge of these women. This is one reason why I approach qualitative research as a process of reflexive practice. Reflexivity involves critical self reflection throughout the research process (Mason, 1996). As I proceeded through the process I carefully documented the interviews, my perceptions of the process, my initial reactions, and my interpretations of what I was experiencing. As I analyzed my data I was constantly evaluating my role in the process and how that shaped what was being interpreted.

Reflexivity means that researchers should constantly take stock of their action and their role in the research process, and subject these to the same critical scrutiny as the rest of their data. This is based on the belief that a researcher cannot be neutral, or objective, or detached, from the knowledge and evidence they are generating. Instead, they should seek to understand their role in that process. (Mason, pp. 5-6)

I know from my experience with this organization over the past several years that my relationship with these women has had an affect on them and I acknowledge that they have had a profound impact on my life and work. I could not ignore these relationships but used this history, knowledge, and experience to inform my understanding of what was happening throughout the research process.

As an active participant in the research process, I also acknowledge that being a white, educated man interviewing mostly African American women introduced dynamics

into the relationship that could have affected the extent the women felt safe to participate in the process. I know from experience that the characteristics of who I am has had an affect on my relationships with these women over time. This is one reason the interviews were conducted at the Imani Family Center. These women take great pride and have considerable ownership of their "space" at the Imani Family center. I tried to respect that space as theirs and in that space they make the rules governing interaction. In addition, that space has played an important role in their learning. Conducting the interviews and holding the focus group in that space allowed me to explore the role the space played in their interactions with me as a researcher.

As a man interviewing women I had to be cautious about how I approached the dialogue. I have noticed a tendency for some of the women to defer to me when they are uncertain what to do or say. This is partially because I am a white man but also because of my education. As a facilitator in the process I worked to help them share their stories. I am not looking for right or wrong answers. The goal of the research was a deeper understanding of the women and the educational process that they use to address the issues affecting their development. Some time ago a woman active in the organization came up to me after a meeting and told me, "Steve, you have helped me to learn that educated people are not always right." At first I was caught off guard and I did not really understand what she meant so I asked her to explain. What she said was that she was raised not to question those who were educated. Simply because they were educated they were right or at least more right than she was. In some way our relationship helped her realize that her opinion was important and no less important than mine. She was taught not to question and thus struggled to develop her voice. In this research, the qualitative, narrative process made it possible for these women to share their stories. In my interpretation of their learning I will tried to use their voice as much as possible and whenever appropriate.

## Chapter Four Case Studies

The data presented in this chapter is primarily derived from a set of interviews conducted in the summer of 2005. Each of the seven women participated in 90 minute interviews. At the end of the interviews each participant completed a short questionnaire that provided descriptive data about themselves. After all the interviews were completed a 90 minute focus group was conducted with five of the seven women present. In addition, follow-up questions were asked over the telephone with two participants seeking clarification on statements made during their interviews.

This chapter is organized into two parts. The first is a brief analysis of the descriptive data. The purpose of this section is to consider characteristics of the individuals and what these characteristics say about the group. The second part of the chapter will be the presentation of the Case Studies. Each of the seven interviews will be presented as individual case studies organized around themes that emerged from analysis of the interviews. The final section in the chapter will summarize key points from the case study interviews and lay the groundwork for the cross case analysis in Chapter five and the conclusions explored in Chapter six.

The seven case studies presented in this chapter illustrate the experiences of each of the seven participants interviewed regarding their experiences with the Circles of Hope process. Each of the case studies will be presented as an individual story. The chapter is organized within a three-part structure that emerged during analysis of the interviews. The first part consists of a single interview with Makeda, the executive director and founder of WomanSpirit and the primary creator of the Circles of Hope process. It became evident during the analysis of her interview that her perspective was very different from the others. She often discussed the process in regards to how it worked and what she hoped to accomplish with the process itself. It was difficult for her

to talk about it as a process she used herself, because her experiences tended to focus more on how the process was developed, what elements were designed to accomplish and the outcomes that she envisioned as the creator and principal facilitator. Her own experiences are woven into her story but her perspective is primarily that of the creator. Makeda's story will go first because as the creator and primary facilitator she provides insights on the Circles of Hope and its designed outcomes that provide a good frame of reference that may be helpful in interpreting the experiences of the other women with the process.

The remaining six interviews are placed in two categories. The first includes those with a facilitation orientation. They are involved in the Circles of Hope process but view their role primarily as that of the facilitator or their primary interest in the process is as someone who would use it to facilitate dialogues. Three of the six women interviewed fall into this category, Aeshe, Debbie, and Danielle. The other category includes those with a participation orientation. The people whose interviews fall into this category may have experiences facilitating the process but primarily view themselves as participants in the process. They often serve in support roles but not normally as facilitators. The three participants in this category include Obie, Gene, and Elizabeth.

#### Descriptive Data

There was not a lot of descriptive data collected on this group as the primary purpose was to explore their stories and try to understand their relationship to the Circles of Hope process and how they applied it as a means of creating change for themselves and their communities. The data that was reported by the women indicated a mostly older, African American, group living on low to moderate incomes.

A total of seven women were included in the study. Six were African American and one was Caucasian. The Caucasian woman was the youngest between 35 and 45 and had the highest income over \$55,000. There were two African American Women

between 45 and 55 in age, three between 56 and 65, and one over 65. The income ranges included two with less than \$15,000 per year, one between \$15,000 and \$24,999, two between \$25,000 and \$34,999, one between \$35,000 and \$44,999, and one over \$55,000.

Four of the women indicated that they had some kind of disability. Three of the four maintain their own home, and are medically retired. All four live alone and are involved in some sort of childrearing activities although not necessarily as a primary caregiver. There were a total of five women involved in childrearing activities.

The women are a fairly well educated group. All seven are high school graduates with some college ranging from 1 to 4 years and two had some graduate school. Four of the women maintain their own homes. Their occupational history included assembly line worker, sales, real estate, public policy analyst, nursing, training, and customer service. Three of the women were medically retired, one was retired, two were employed and one was self employed. For more detail on the descriptive data see Table 1 and Table 2 in chapter three. These tables include all the descriptive data gathered about the participants in this study.

#### *Case Study Interviews Part I the Founder*

The founder plays a central role in the development and use of the process. All of the women in the study have a relationship with her and the process making it difficult to separate her from the process. In order to understand how the other women in the study have developed as a result of the Circles of Hope it is important to gain a better understanding of how the founder views the process, its strengths, and her role as both facilitator and participant.

#### *Makeda*

Makeda is the founder and executive director of WomanSpirit and is the primary architect of the Circles of Hope process. Makeda designed the process based on her

experiences, the input of the women in her Circle, and the resources of others doing similar kinds of work. In describing her role Makeda said:

I'm an active gatherer of people; I'm a listener; I bring together diverse groups who will not necessarily meet each other ordinarily in this community, people from outside the community with people inside the community, black, white, men and women. We bring together diverse groups and we often do not have an issue that drives us. We listen to the issues that concern the people in the community and that seem to threaten us or even to assist us and then we try to figure out how to utilize [address] those issues and how to understand them and how to work with them even if it means working with different groups of people, people we've not previously worked with. So my participation is that of an organizer, of an animator, social historian, counselor, minister, and teacher.

As an observer of Makeda's work for a number of years I can testify to the fact that she does indeed play all the roles she mentions above. In observing her work and the programs and projects that WomanSpirit has worked on over the past eight years; it is clear that Makeda is the central figure. One key role that she plays is the animator. An animator, as she describes it, is someone who facilitates a group dialogue but is also part of the group, sharing their experiences and perspectives on the issues being discussed. As the animator it is her responsibility to engage the other participants in the dialogue but she is also able to offer her support and counsel with participants on a personal level in a way that many facilitators would not consider appropriate. She is not neutral. She has a perspective and it is often shared as part of a dialogue experience but hers is one of many voices that are heard.

Actually I'm an animator not a facilitator, although I'm a good facilitator, but my skill is a slightly different one in the sense that I am both part of the group and also helping to facilitate the discussion and analysis of the problem. I have some things that I bring with me because of who I am that I might not if I was facilitating a group of attorneys at an environmental justice conference. That role I learned from Jane Vella, and also from the training for transformation process...it's Freirian in this role of an involved leader...so that's something that is a bit different for me than for most of the people that I have trained. But I am asked for that often, that extra step is part of our analysis [the role of animator]. For instance if I am going to talk about Medicaid, I'm going to talk about Medicaid funding and I'm going to talk about SSI [Social Security Insurance]. I can certainly ask impartial questions of the group. I also have a testimony that is important so that when...unless I am paid to facilitate a group in which my opinions are not wished then my opinion is part of the group that I am facilitating most of the time.

The work is as much a calling as it is a program or project. Makeda's identification with the Circle is one of her core identities and reflects who she is spiritually, intellectually, and personally. The Circles of Hope is a reflection of how she lives her daily life. Makeda believes so much in its potential to help people that she has committed herself to sharing the process with others as a facilitator and as a teacher. She approaches the work with evangelical zeal. Makeda is the executive director and it is a full-time job but is largely unpaid. WomanSpirit is 11 years old and Makeda has been the executive director the entire time. During one 18 month period WomanSpirit was part of a grant funded project that included a salary for her in the budget. However the other 9.5 years have been largely as a volunteer. Makeda lives at the Imani Family



Center and the organization picks up some of her basic living expenses but most of the time she has had to use her own resources to support the work of the organization.

The Circles of Hope process is central to her life and is primarily based on her vision and experience. It is a reflection of the values and principles important to Makeda and those close to her. In visiting with her about the process and her experiences as a participant and facilitator, a number of key themes emerged including; 1) the peer group as family, 2) diversity of people and experiences, 3) equal participation and shared leadership, 4) basic agreements, 5) structure for analysis and learning, 6) self determination and the development of women, 7) principled partnerships, 8) engagement and support, 9) a place for everyone who wants to participate, and 10) bridging to others: sharing the process.

*Peer group as family.* The Circles of Hope process grew out of a small gathering of women who initially began to meet as a Bible study group that Makeda describes as a peer group. Some of these women are still involved with WomanSpirit and the Circles of Hope Process. The Circle became an extension of their relationship and created an environment where they could grow together and develop themselves as individuals. According to Makeda,

In the beginning the primary Circle was a Bible Study Circle that met at my house on Monday, this was before we had any kind of center at all and we would meet and we would do Bible study and just kind of have a Sister Circle and talk about what was going on in our lives and that was the first Circle and it evolved because we knew of other groups of women who operated in Circles.

The original Circle was a group of women with strong ties to one another. The process grew out of those connections. Throughout the Circles of Hope process there is a core value on relationship building that Makeda describes as being part of a family.

The Circle is not a replacement or substitute for family but extends how they relate to family members to the Circle.

Well it's like being part of a family. In Africa people mature in peer groups and so you pretty much stay in your group all your life and so part of this is my peer group, my group that I matured with and so the Circle gave us a way that we made sure that we held onto those relationships and that sort of thing but it's also a place for meeting new people and for talking about what's going on in the world.

An emphasis for Makeda is on the quality of relationships and maintaining those relationships over time, a lifetime. Participants in the Circles develop their relationships and commitment to one another but also explore the external world using the Circles of Hope as a process and safe place for exploring issues and changes in the broader world that may affect them personally, their families, or community. They seek out those who they view as fellow travelers, people with similar experiences and values related to the development of women and families from around the world.

Initially Makeda was attracted to other groups of women that operated in Circles and often she would make contact with these groups. Some had a similar focus to their Circle and others were tied to specific issues. A connection to a group of women interested in health is how Makeda describes how the Bible study group became the Circles of Hope.

They didn't necessarily call it this but the National Black Woman's Health Project was one such project [group of women who used Circles as a means of convening women around issues] and when the health project came to St Louis there was a woman who was at Wash U [Washington University], an MSW [Master of Social Work] who was the director...we came and asked if we could...the project had nothing... if we could offer

the project housing in our center so that we could do Sister Circles. They politically weren't sure they wanted to do that and so we decided we did want to have the Circles [anyway] and if the health project wasn't willing to come in and to work with us, we would just create our own and these became the first Circles of Hope.

*Diversity of people and experiences.* While Makeda talks about participation in the Circle, it is not long before she begins talking about all the women that she and others at the Imani Family Center have had the opportunity to meet and in many cases host at their center. They use the process as a bridge to these groups and often they include women from other cultures with a different set of norms and values different from many of the women in the Circles of Hope.

One of the things that has stood out for me is the range of women who have been in the Circles, not just from this community but people that have traveled from all over the country and all over the world. To think back on some of those Circles and...we've had collaborations with groups in the city so that we held them in different places. To stand back and think about some of those Circles where we had Sangeetha from India or Thandewe Ncomo from South Africa, or Wangari Maathai from Kenya or the Germans or other groups of people, the Appalachians, people from New York, etc... One of the things that has stood out for me is the diverse set of visitors who came to see us and to be part of our dialogues and discussions. That stands out for me, the faces of the people.

In addition to people from other places there have been a number of opportunities for the Circles to work with diverse groups in their own community. Makeda describes this when talking about developing relationships with women from the various women religious organizations in the St. Louis area. Many of the women in

Makeda's community were isolated and did not have access to other groups of women in the broader community.

The Circle provided a forum where women from many different traditions and value systems were able to learn about each other and relate in ways not previously available to them. Diverse groups of women from around the region have sought them out.

Some of these people [the women in Makeda's community] had never talked to a woman religious before [Catholic Nun]. I can imagine that many of these people had never talked to a Jewish person, a Muslim, people from other countries, so that there's a vast learning curve of just what we are exposed to because the Circle exists. Other people outside our group come to find it because they wish to learn in the Circle too... we're learning from the people who come in, we're learning from the synergy of our new experiences because if the table changes and people bring different issues and perspectives of change then what we know collectively changes, so when we talk to the woman who has lived in Botswana during the revolution or when we talk to a person who has been part of the destruction of an earthquake in Turkey we really begin to get insights into things that there was no way for us to know at all.

This type of learning is very important to Makeda and generates lots of energy for her and the other participants. The Circle serves as a place where the group is exposed to a wide variety of perspectives and views of the world. It is their collective experiences, subsequent dialogues about these experiences and what they have learned that she finds valuable and provides insight to her own reality.

When working with diverse groups, particularly larger groups that are international in composition, it may not be possible to create a Circles of Hope process

because the investment of time and the development of adequate support systems are often not feasible given the context. However, there are many elements of the process that are adaptable to other forms of dialogue and she is able to adapt the process and utilize some of the same skills in facilitating discussions among diverse groups of people that are not necessarily able to invest the time in creating a Circle but may be interested in using elements of the Circle as part of a dialogue among diverse groups of people that have weak ties to one another.

I am able to use these skills without using the WomanSpirit's [version of the Circles of Hope] process...I am often asked to facilitate meetings that are not support groups and don't have the support group part in it like a regular Circle would and in the facilitation of meetings I am still able to use the participatory meeting methods, the insights, asking questions ...for instance, I'll say when we went to Germany with Andrea we did not do a Circle of Hope but we used the same skills [to facilitate a community dialogue]...particularly the analysis and the conclusions, recommendations, observations and trends and analysis of the relationships between people's issues of concern in various parts of the world and their methods for meeting their needs. I might spend less time trying to find out how many kids you have and more time trying to find out how do you get water so that it moves from personal support to developmental issues.

In the passage above she was referring to a dialogue in which I was a co-facilitator. We worked with a group of about 70 people in Stuttgart, Germany, in October of 2004. It was a one-day program with no expectations that these 70 people would continue to meet and create a Circle. It was a process using many of the elements of the Circles of Hope process that helped these community leaders begin to learn about

each other, share their perspectives on the development of their community, create a vision for the future, and make plans for how they would make this vision a reality. A process like the dialogue in Stuttgart needs more formal structure than is often apparent in the Circles of Hope process. Makeda noted that in the larger meetings you may have no previous contact with the people who are in the Circle and you may not have contact with them after the Circle so the Circle has to be stronger in terms of its direction than it does with a group of people that you see every Wednesday night. “Having to think about culture, having to think about social identity, all of those things are challenging in Circles that aren’t WomanSpirit Circles”

Even though there are challenges to working with diverse groups she feels they are valuable experiences and if the focus is on the things that people share in common many things are possible. This is a view that a number of the other women in this study share. It is based on their experiences with women from all over the world.

I believe there are many more commonalities and similarities among people on the issues we face no matter where we are in the world than are easily discernable. I have come to look for the money ties between situations that can be public crisis situations.

The dialogues in a Circle often shift towards understanding the impacts of changes in public policy on the women in the Circle and others with whom they have associated from around the world; they form plans around those issues shared in common. In Germany, the women were keenly interested in how changes in public support were being implemented because they believed that their systems would be undergoing similar changes in the future. The Germans wanted to understand Makeda’s experience as a low-income African American woman in Missouri, so they could learn from her experience and benefit from her wisdom because they believed that what

happens to her in Missouri may eventually be felt in their neighborhood in Stuttgart, Germany. Makeda comments,

For instance, on this reduction on Medicaid and Medicare, in the very beginning my conversation in this community had it that Matt Blunt was bad and he was doing it and I was saying no this is going to be exported all over this country fairly soon so we need to figure out what's being exported and why?

If Makeda and the others in her Circle can better understand their own situation they will be better prepared to give testimony to others about their situation, learn from other communities that may have similar conditions, and help other communities plan for a similar reality in the future.

Makeda leads her Circle in an analysis of an important issue like a change in Medicaid and Medicare and so they can explore how the issue affects their Circle and the broader community. They want to better understand what is driving these changes so that they can assess whether or not it is something that is unique to them and their circumstance or whether it is part of larger national or global movement that impacts many others. Makeda notes that they try to resist demonizing the Governor because they believe that the issue is larger than the Governor and that it is part of a global trend to reduce government supported social programs. It is important to them as community members but it is also important to others in their national and international network because it might be something that has appeared in other parts of the country or other parts of the world. If so, then they may be able to learn from the experiences of others and they are able to share their experiences as testimony regarding the affect of these policy changes so that others can be better prepared when they are faced with similar policy changes in their communities.

*Equal participation and shared leadership.* Makeda believes that everyone should have an opportunity to speak to the issues that are most important to them. She often mentioned that people are the experts on their own experiences. The Circle is a place where those experiences are explored as a group with each person sharing her own expertise.

I describe the Circles as a process and that the Circle just refers to the fact that we're equal in...we're equal in who we are within the Circle and that the process is ongoing. It's not just one time and stop. I explain it as a meeting—it's a participatory meeting where people aren't talked at—everybody has an opportunity to speak and that the Circle itself has the ability to make the choice about what it is that the Circle would like to discuss or work around so it's a Circle that has lots of choices about how it can operate. We have choices about who can facilitate. We have choices about what we do with the information when we gather it and who we consult with as we gather it. So it's a way to think about things and to come to new conclusions sometimes or to reaffirm conclusions that we made without a lot of examination.

Equal participation is linked to the development of shared leadership. Makeda is considered by most as the primary leader of the group. However, she describes the Circle as a place where leadership and responsibility for leadership is shared and not concentrated in a single individual providing others in the Circle an opportunity to develop their own capacity to play leadership roles and does not put too much reliance on a single leader.

The other strength of the process has to do something like the geese and their model of shared leadership. There are enough people here now that know how to do all the parts of the Circle so that if I pass someone else



can take over leadership, that it is our joint effort that supports the leader and the leaders work and so I think that that's important that the leadership can and is shared and responsibilities are divided according to people's interest and abilities and sometimes not even abilities but the need to get things done.

There are many ways that a person can develop themselves as leaders in the Circle. In order for a Circle to be successful there are many roles that need to be addressed including animator/facilitator, recorder, time keeper, researcher, presenter, contributor, supporter, and others. Each one of these (and others) are elements of a successful Circle and present opportunities for the people to play and develop their leadership potential in the Circle.

I think that having the others as a kind of a back and forth measure or way to talk about things. The others are as skilled as I am, if not more. Many of them are more skilled because they say that I am a hard task master but many of them are more skilled in caring for and supporting others so I have the benefit of all their beautiful gifts and talent to shore me up even when I don't think they need to.

Makeda believes that having a safe place to gather, share ideas, and take refuge from the stresses of the everyday world is critical to being able to focus their own development. People are only likely to try new ideas and take the chances necessary to develop their leadership capacity when they feel like they are in an environment where that type of development is supported. "The Circle as a safe place stands out for me in that people come in and feel safe enough to talk about things that may have been difficult for them to discuss in other places."

*Basic agreements.* Basic agreements are a key tool Makeda uses to create a safe environment and ensuring equal participation in the Circle. Basic agreements are

essentially ground rules or expectations that govern the process in the Circle. In a Circle the basic agreements are developed and agreed upon when a Circle first meets and reaffirmed every time they meet as a Circle. They provide clarity of expectations in terms of how they will relate to one another, spell out rules of behavior, and provide a framework for the discussion. Basic agreements include may include things like no one speaks a second time until everyone has had a change to speak once, no advice, and time limits.

Basic agreements serve as a means of equalizing the participants by establishing a set of rules and expectations that all will follow. This is particularly important to Makeda in working with diverse groups. For instance, when there are differences in education, social status or economic wealth there can be problems in terms of who gets to participate and whose voice is most important. Basic agreements create a set of expectations that help to alleviate these differences in the Circle and begin to equalize relationships so that people can share and learn from one another regardless of their differences. Makeda describes them as core strengths of the process.

As a leader is that it [basic agreements] are clearly defined so it's not a mystical project that I have to do a Harry Potter at every Circle, that the rules for the Circle are clear and up front and everyone is aware of them. The parameters, how long the Circle will take, what the focus is, how we're going to address that. Those things are pretty clear and have to be put together before the Circle. The Circle is never a waste of time because somebody is always invested in preparing it. Those things are important.

*Structure for analysis and learning.* Another core value for Makeda is learning. Her interest in development seems to be driven (in part) by an intense interest in how

systems work and relate to each other. The Circle provides a structure for the kind of analysis and learning that helps people understand the circumstances they find themselves faced with, acquire the skills necessary to address some of the challenges they face and learn how they can go about changing their circumstances.

It's a place for analysis, it's a place for comparing what is going on with me personally to what is going on with other people and then trying to figure out what's up with that, how does that connect. It becomes a place for instruction as newer or younger women come in they seek basic instruction about child rearing and other kinds of things some of us have already been through...being a part of a Circle has been a part of helping us resolve problems to analyze the circumstance of our lives, to share strategies of what is working and what is not working, a way to meet new people in a safe environment and to talk about projects that interest you and to find if there are other people who might be interested in doing something about the issue or concern.

There are two elements of a Circle where structure makes an important contribution to learning. One is content development and the other is group process. When looking at content development Makeda believes the focus is on what the group is trying to accomplish in a Circle. The core structural framework for development of program content includes Education for Action, Social Support, and Organizing for Change components. They effectively work together to provide an environment where learning is focused on understanding the issues affecting their development and developing systems of support and action plans that reflect their reality and capacity to act. The goal of learning in this framework is some sort of action, result or changed behavior. The simplicity of the process makes the exploration of issues possible for

many people because they are able to define their relationship to the Circle and participate in ways that are comfortable for them.

It [the Circle] doesn't compel you to a long obligation and people are pretty free to come and go in and out of Circles as they feel the need to participate and they can change their roles. They can be people who are in need of support, people who wish to give others support, observers, so you can have different roles.

Some people will participate in a Circle over a long period of time contributing regularly and incorporating the process into their regular decision making. Others will only come and go as they feel the need to participate and the ability to contribute. For Makeda the Circle reflects how she thinks and makes decisions.

Group process is the second area where structure aids analysis and learning. It focuses more on managing interpersonal relations and creating an environment where participants feel safe to share their perspectives and can develop their capacity for problem solving. In the following passage Makeda talks about some of the process elements of the Circle that facilitate analysis and learning:

Those things like basic agreements, time management, roles within the Circle, timekeeper, and that sort of thing. Those things make the Circle easier to administer because they are the same and everyone knows them and if someone doesn't know them they are fairly easy to explain including the reasons why we decided to use these processes so that's fairly easy. The physical part of it sitting down, getting a coffee, or tea, or whatever and beginning to talk to one another is gratifying because often the people don't know one another and they seem to be happy to encounter each other in a different way, in a deeper way, so that seems to work well. The time limits and all those things that kind of keep some

safety but also keep one person from taking over the work of the group, those are transferable and the people who have been in the Circles they then take those techniques once they've learned them and they've used them in business meetings and other kinds of meetings to facilitate meeting but also to get some handle on what's going on when a meeting seems unclear. What's the agenda, what's the timeframe? so people will start to ask those questions.

Makeda believes in learning that is based on experience and feels the Circles of Hope process is an experiential learning process and that appeals to her.

I'm very...certain that the best way to learn for me at this time is not in a traditional classroom with a test every six weeks but in this process of talking and doing and acting, reflecting and sharing experiences and strategies and that this is a new learning style and a new way to learn but it is as effective and as legitimate as any other kind of learning.

The Circle has helped her develop an appreciation of the diversity of interests and knowledge bases within the group and has stimulated her to go out and learn more about a topic or issue that she knows little about so that she is better able to contribute to the group even if it is not an issue that she has a strong passion to address. "It pushes me to learn more about things that the group doesn't know a lot about so that I may come back and contribute new information so that we can continue to grow as we think."

She often speaks about how the Circle has helped her connect the dots and see how things are related to one another and this of high value to her as a learner and also as a facilitator of the process. As a facilitator she discusses how the program was designed to encourage a connecting of the dots. A key element is building in reflection time so that the learner can not only connect what they are learning to their own experience but also place their situation in a broader, sometimes global context so that

when they are addressing issues for themselves they can also think about how what is happening is affecting others.

What we wanted to do was create a place for women to be...at the end some of Psalms there's this word "Selah" and it means to pause and reflect... what we wanted to do as the psalms reminds us is that you need to pause and reflect. We wanted to pause and reflect about what was going on. Not just be shuttled from experience to experience or problem to problem but actually take a look at what was going not just to us but to other people around the world and not to just see what was going on but to see how those things were connected and what the root cause was and how those root causes were related. What could we do to overcome what seemed inevitable, was it really inevitable?

The learning helps her to see connections between different events and to focus on specific actions and strategies that will work for them. Sometimes the actions are immediate and designed to solve a pressing issue such as access to medication and there is no time for connecting the dots. However the real value in a Circle is that over time it helps participants connect the dots so they can do more planning and move from a crisis management perspective where people are scrambling to meet their immediate needs to a future orientation where the selection of strategies to be developed are to resolve issues that are anticipated in the future based on events that are happening now. Learning has helped Makeda become more future oriented in her thinking and in her actions. In a discussion about changes in Medicaid and how these changes affect her personally she illustrates how she is future oriented in her problem solving even when she is dealing with issues that need immediate attention. She has developed an anticipatory method of thinking that mirrors how the Circles of Hope works that considers her immediate needs, her future needs and those of her community.

There has to be an almost an entirely new approach to managing healthcare problems because we're going to have to figure out some way to manage these problems without money so preventive healthcare, disease management, all of these things are going to have to become important talking points in Circles because if we have education, we have support and part of support is what are we going to do right now. What are we going to do tonight? I just called CHIPs, the local health clinic that one of the women in the Circle belongs to, to find out if I could see the acupuncturist and the massage therapist there and I was told it was going to cost \$75 because I am not a member of the clinic. I maintain a membership in St. Louis County's clinic but now I am going to go down to CHIPs and join a Diabetes support group because in a minute you're not going to be able to get into these clinics. They're going to be overbooked as people are cut-off....so Friday I am going down personally and enroll. I have no interest in belonging to two clinics but it may take that. I also need to find...I live in the County, and the City has health exercise places and stuff like that. I can't go to them [city programs] because I don't live in the City so I'm trying figure that out...I am trying to figure how I can go down and enroll in a clinic so that I can get free acupuncture and can use the water aerobics things. These are some of the things I am trying to figure out for myself...but other people need to know them too so people are coming in asking for information, malpractice insurance, cancer treatment, things that we didn't know, we've had to figure out by going through it and learning how to share that information with one another.

*Self determination and the development of women.* Makeda defines self determination as the right and the ability to make choices for herself. One major choice

she made was to make her work with WomanSpirit her life's work. It was not an easy choice because she does not have much of a personal life outside her work. She lives upstairs at the Imani Family Center and she has invested most of her own resources in the organization. It was not a comfortable choice because she has no life outside her work. There is no distance between her professional work and her personal needs and issues.

I stopped doing other work on a full-time basis and this became my life work. So that's the most profound...that's a biggie because this is my life work and it didn't necessarily come with a lot of income so that my life outside WomanSpirit kind of blended into everything kind of rolling around and being around here including me living in the center itself, giving up my house, selling my momma's house, all of those things helped to sever my independence from this process and made my life and my work almost the same...that's not always so comfortable. There are many, many times when I wished I had more distance.

She made this choice because she believes that the Circles of Hope process can help other women make their own choices, become active participants in their own lives and not be dependent on others to make decisions for them. One of the principle elements of the process that makes it possible for women to become more self-reliant and better able to make decisions is the place itself, the Imani Family Center.

The place where we are working now is a very good place and we find it relaxing and rejuvenating ...It's a lovely place. It feels safe. It's under our control. We are not told we can work an hour and then we have to go...we are able to work at our own pace. It's convenient to our homes, to our neighborhood, public transportation even for people who are not driving and it fits us. The space fits us. We have changed it to reflect our



interests and who we are and as we walk around here we can see ourselves in the place.

The Imani Family center is a reflection of Makeda, the other women who work there, and those who participate in the Circles. It is a public space so there is a sense of shared ownership as many of the women who use the center contribute to its maintenance. They take great pride in the place and they have invested a lot of themselves in the space decorating it with pictures and artifacts from their programs and travels. There is a sense of spirituality that lingers in the walls. Some believe it is because of the building's history, some believe it is because of the nature of their work and others believe it is a reflection of Makeda's own spirituality and her constant presence in the building.

The pictures, exhibits, and other artifacts exhibited throughout the place are symbols of their journey and commitment to the work they do and reflect the values important to Makeda and many of the other women in the Circle. In many ways the place itself is evidence of their own decision-making capacity and self reliance. They have no outside funder that pays for it. The women themselves raised the money to buy the buildings and pay their operating expenses. This gives them great latitude in how they use the space and it is very much a place for women, run by women, reflecting the norms, values and sensibilities of women, especially African American women, committed to addressing issues of development. Makeda is the face that most people connect to the place, the process and the organization.

The place makes people feel safe and comfortable while they work. The Circles of Hope process also reflects values of self reliance and self determination and provides the methodology whereby people get to develop and exercise their decision making capacity. These are core values for Makeda and illustrate her commitment to helping others develop their own skills in making decisions. Her work with the process

is a reflection of this value. People come to the Circle with many gifts and the process itself is about helping people discover their gifts and learn how to use those gifts to the benefit of the individual and the Circle. In describing what gifts she brings to a Circle she said,

The other gift I have is an ability to restate things so that various people can grasp it. I can take a complicated issue and talk about it in terms that a group of women sitting at the table in the garden can understand so we can talk about things like structural adjustment, we can talk about things like world banking entities, like the world bank and the IMF, we can hold those conversations here and there are not a lot of places I can go and a group of grassroots people can fall into those conversations because they've not previously had the information to discuss it or to see people who been impacted. Telling our stories, learning to tell our stories well and also the "so what", the "what", "now what". The "so what", is a very important tool, so what shall we do now, as a result of this, how will we act.

Makeda is able to help the women in her Circles sort through the information available to them using the Circles of Hope process, place their stories and experiences in a larger context and help them move into a decision-making mode. She always tries to help people answer three simple questions: "What", what is happening? "So what", why is this important to me and the others in the Circle? "Now what", what are we going to do? It is not enough to simply name the problem and understand what is happening; they also need to go to that next step and figure out what they are going to do about it. This kind of decision-making is what leads to self determination and self reliance.

There are times that the choices the women make for themselves do not make sense to some in the broader community who would like to see them focusing more

directly on issues of poverty and other social concerns. They believe that all resources benefiting the poor should be focused on crisis work and they do not understand the development perspective that exists at WomanSpirit. Other times, existing interests in the community have a vested interest in not having groups like WomanSpirit speak for themselves.

So I think it's two things [why they are marginalized by some in the community]. It's as who we are as low income African American Women; poverty and our own poverty is supposed to be our concern. There are organizations whose existence depends on having a client base that's pretty well dependent on them and I worked for many organizations where we were supposed to have a tenant council or whatever, but there was very little input from the people who were impacted, so to see us come to the table.

Addressing poverty is one of those immediate concerns that they are confronted with everyday. However, Makeda believes that the long-term development of the whole person is equally important, and enables people to find their own way once the crisis passes. Addressing issues as they happen is important to the Circle but the real value in being part of the Circle is the development of the person over time. It is a development process.

An example of how development works through the Circle of Hope is the Girls Circle. Approximately two years ago a group of high school girls from the Kansas City area spent a week doing volunteer work at the Imani Family center. They were part of a Christian youth organization that connected youth organizations to community organizations around the Midwest such as WomanSpirit. WomanSpirit has been part of this program for a number of years. The young women from Kansas City have been spending a week during their summer in St. Louis doing volunteer work at the Imani

Family Center. One time a couple of neighborhood girls joined the girls from Kansas City when they were in town and asked Makeda if the Imani Family Center could start a program for them so they helped the girls start a Circle for themselves with their mothers. They meet Saturday mornings and work on issues important to the girls using the Circles of Hope process. They do some things that will develop their basic skills such as being more successful in school but they will also do other things that the girls have chosen to do themselves such as trips to the museum, concerts, shows, and other places. There is always a learning objective but it may not be focused on grades at school or addressing poverty. To some in the community this may be considered a waste of resources but to the girls and the others in the Circle it is an important part of their development. Their work has been recognized and in the summer of 2006 some of the older girls will be participating in an International Youth Summit in Germany sponsored by the United Nations.

*Principled partnerships.* For Makeda, development is about learning how to explore issues and develop appropriate strategies that will help Makeda and others get where they want to go. It is also about developing a personal voice on a range of issues. The Circle provides a place to learn, get support and make plans that make change possible. She believes very strongly that she is the expert on her own experience and that if she and others like her can articulate their own views on issues affecting them as low income people in the community that they should be heard and valued for their contribution. One of her frustrations has been that it is difficult to have their contributions valued by those who were supposed to be of help to them as poor people in the community. Often these organizations do not know how to collaborate with groups like WomanSpirit and when they have the opportunity they may be reluctant to do so because the volunteers at WomanSpirit are not properly credentialed.

I know [a social work faculty member at a respected university in the area] who once told me that he didn't like playing with amateur social workers. Since we were talking about our own lives it was very difficult for me to understand how he could be an expert at being a poor black woman and I was the amateur. I didn't get it (laughing)... What does that mean, right, right, and it breaks down for us because often what it means is that they want to take our picture and count our numbers but they don't want to give over any decision-making authority to us.

There are numerous instances where they are challenged by service organizations that want to access the people WomanSpirit serves but they do not want to collaborate with WomanSpirit on a programmatic level. Makeda values working with other organizations and individuals that share similar values as they relate to self determination and self reliance. It's how they develop themselves around their own identity in ways that are healthy for them. She acknowledges this when she talks about working with groups that value what WomanSpirit can offer:

There are many organizations who know that what we do is useful and part of what they need to do but they don't know how to do it. So they'll ask us to do that part in conjunction with whatever it is they do. It's kind of even-stein...there's a lot of documentation in all kinds of community development programs all over the country and all over the globe that says that you have to have the input of the people who are most impacted by the problem.

Makeda calls these principled partnerships. When she goes out in the community she and the others in the Circles represent themselves and look for opportunities to work with partners that value their input and are interested in their own development.

*Engagement.* Engagement is a concept for Makeda that has implications for her personally and her work with communities. One of the main motivations for Makeda is to contradict the notion that women, especially low-income, African American women who have been marginalized by the broader society, are victims and incapable of responding to their own issues. She believes that they are capable of speaking on their own behalf and have the capacity to make important contributions on their own behalf and on behalf of others in their community. Many of these women face difficult challenges and need support in order to improve their lives but Makeda believes these women are also the key to developing workable programs that can begin to effectively address their issues. They know their life experiences better than anyone else and have ideas about what to do about the challenges they face. They just need a place to develop and share their ideas. The Circle is a forum where they can learn how to do this.

When we first started this work we were trying to change something. We were trying to contradict the notion of poor women as victims and as poor women not having any solutions or recommendations for their own issues. We had plenty of recommendations and solutions and we have tried some that worked but we didn't have the money to keep them going and some that didn't work but we felt that ...that we had as much right to try solutions that didn't work as Matt Blunt [the governor] (laughing).

Makeda uses the Circle to help people learn how to connect the dots so they can better understand changes that are coming that will impact them and others in their community. She encourages them to then step out of the Circle and venture into the community using the support system in the Circle to take some risks and get involved in issues they care about that may or may not directly affect them. They learn how to identify principled partners in the community and they represent themselves and the Circle with those institutions and often get involved in a range of community activities.

Makeda brings to her work as a facilitator of the process a keen understanding of her role as someone who facilitates the engagement of others in the Circle and then encourages the people to expand their engagement to other groups in the community.

For instance, like Obie and them when they went to the heart association.

They wanted to raise money; they wanted to have a heart walk [and] some other specific things. They took their leadership, convened meetings within that process [the one being directed by the heart association], and were very, very successful and were able to assist in facilitating the process and making sure that group's aims got met...They took the skills they had and used them to, not to pursue their own agenda, but to work collectively with other groups on a common agenda.

It is through this engagement that they are able to begin to challenge common community perceptions about who they are and what they are capable of doing.

Another element is encouraging people in a Circle to try different things. Makeda often cultivates this by letting people decide how they want to help around the center. In the following passage she talks about this while she describes the work a group of girls did at the Imani Family Center as part of a volunteer project. The Center needed a couple of rooms painted. The girls wanted to do the job but they had never painted before and their adult leaders were nervous about the girls doing this project. Makeda and the others at Imani encouraged the girls to figure out how they wanted to do the job and to do it.

Yeah, those are some abilities to help others having confidence in people, giving people the opportunity to try new things, having high expectations, being willing to pitch in, and being willing to make adjustments to things based on how things work out. These are skills in helping others that allow people to grow with us. "Oh, I did the wrong thing, I'm going to mess

it up.” You’re not going to mess it up, it’s just paint, you’ll paint over it if don’t work out. There aren’t many places where young people particularly are told choose your paint, and pick out a design and go forward...they hardly get that opportunity unless they’re in some sort of artworks or something like that.

This approach helps people build self confidence and she has confidence that the process works and confidence in her ability to make the process work for others. This makes it possible for her and others to continue the work even when some in the community see them as interlopers or busybodies that do not have the credentials or the right kind of experience to play a leadership role in some community contexts. The confidence comes from the fact that they have been engaged, their work has been scrutinized, and others locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally value and use the same process in their own organizations and communities.

When I go into the broader community or society I know that I have something to contribute and I know that I have something of value to contribute. I know that people pay me to give the information, they send for me to come from all over the world...so the fact that it has worked, that we’ve documented it through UNDP processes, through GROOTS, that we’ve documented it in International meetings, that we’ve documented it locally and regionally, that St. Louis University has evaluated it. I am confident and sure that what we are doing is something that has value.

The Circle provides a framework for engagement that makes it possible to negotiate relationships with other groups and facilitate their interaction in a productive way. Makeda uses the Circles of Hope as a means of managing these relationships and connecting Circles to one another and linking them to events they have planned for



themselves and their community. She is engaging with a wide variety of actors around the world and connecting people in her community to a very diverse set of people and experiences that otherwise would not have been possible. In these encounters she brings her experience with the process and skills as a facilitator.

As a change agent I am impacted by an issue. As a result of that I then begin to determine who else might have an interest in this issue and who may have an interest but not know it yet because their interest isn't defined in a way yet that they can see. Then with that I begin to figure out what information would help us understand this better. Who else could we talk to, what else could happen so that I will then invite, at our expense, in our space, under our leadership because that costs money for some organizations, people who will come in and begin to create a dialogue around a subject. From there we may become a community task force or we may find that the group wants to do something that's a bit different from what we wanted to do but we could support the work of the group in doing those things that are consistent with our vision. We may find that the group wants to be a coalition, the group that has just been casual gatherers wants to be a coalition and wants to work together specifically to do some things.

*A place for everyone.* Makeda is at her best when she has a room full of people with a variety of perspectives engaged in a dialogue about something they all care about. She places a high value on that type of interaction.

There are a lot of people who come from time to time for special events or for special kinds of meetings that have to do with things that concern them greatly and that's good it gives us kind of like fresh blood. It gives us new ways of thinking things, it challenges us and it helps us stay

abreast of what is happening in the world because everybody is in their places so that things are going on all the time that we're not aware of. So it's helpful to have new voices and new faces talking about things that we may not know a lot about.

This type of hospitality is developmental for her and the Circles. They have met many people and discovered many new ideas. They have also presented their view of reality on their own terms. It is a place where people go to learn about the realities of life in their community. When they host groups it is always a Circle which means they use the ground rules, ask the questions, and follow their agenda. For many visitors it is an eye opener because they do not expect that from low-income African American women. Others love the freedom to share their ideas and philosophies. They also get to listen to different perspectives from their own. It is a place where people keep coming back. For those who want to volunteer the door is always open and the volunteer gets to decide how they want to contribute.

There is literally an open door policy and everyone contributes what they want to contribute. Some are very involved in running Circles, others as participants, volunteers, gardeners, painters, anything they want to do.

[Someone new to the Circle] decided that she was going to clean the closets and I thought, this probably wouldn't be the very best way to do that but she was determined that she was going to do it. She set aside time in her calendar and she came and contributed her time because she wanted me to help get ready for our rummage sale...and I think that is a pretty good example of a person whose not been in the Circle as long as others, came and said, this is something that I can do. I don't know what they're down there interviewing and talking about but I do know that I can do this and I can help the organization.

There are times when people who participate in a Circle will want Makeda to make their concerns her concerns or their priorities her priorities. "I am in a sense able to listen to many things without deciding that they are my burden." If what people want to do is different from the agenda Makeda has for herself or the organization she will encourage them to form their own Circle and to develop their ideas on their own offering her support but not her commitment to their agenda.

Even the new people as they come in, they come in offering things. They come in offering things. Some of the things offered I can't afford to take advantage of right now like [the woman] with her caring counseling. She wanted to locate next door but that was too much responsibility for me and if I really wanted to help them I had to tell them the truth and the truth is this was not the best location for them. They needed to be in a place that was more centrally located and more trafficked and I think it helped them to go to northwest plaza although they were scared about it at first but I just stayed with them.

The Circle is very flexible and open to different people and perspectives but one of the real skills that Makeda has developed has been to focus her work on the things she cares about and wants to work on. Those who share similar interests are able to help and those who are part of the Circle but may have different interests she will support and encourage but she won't make their agendas her agenda.

*Bridging to others and sharing the process.* One of the things the women in this study have consistently shared is that they have appreciated the opportunities it has provided for them to connect with other people and organizations. In Makeda's case there are two principle aspects of bridge building reflected in the experiences she shared. First, there are people and organizations who come to her interested in the process and she is able to connect with them by sharing the process and using it to

bridge between them and the people in the community they want to reach. Often, the groups develop an interest in the process and she helps them develop their capacity to use it. Second, she places a high value on diversity and by ensuring the process acknowledges diversity and provides a forum for exploring differences she is often able to use the Circles of Hope process to engage groups and organizations with diverse interests in a Circle to find common ground through their shared experience.

The Imani Family Center is a small organization that has learned that there are few things they can actually accomplish alone without the resources of other groups and organizations. The dialogue process of the Circles of Hope is often the resource that the Imani Center can contribute that others want. Most nonprofits are interested in engaging with other organizations but often do not have the capacity or relationships with people in the communities where they want to work. Makeda often serves as that link and uses the Circles of Hope to help connect organizations with resources to people in the community they are not able to access without her help. The Circles of Hope process makes it possible to bridge across cultural differences. When these resource organizations work with her they see how well the process engages people and they want to learn how to do it themselves. She has worked with economic development, housing, healthcare and other resource groups to help them bridge to the people they want to serve.

We spread out and started doing work with other organizations and other agencies and other churches and groups and one of the things that we, that I emphasize, is that people were being trained for leadership.

Whether it was in their workplace or their church, their social organizations that they belong to other not for profit organizations, they were being trained to take this process and to examine what was going on, what was going well, what was challenging and what support might

make a difference and to be busy about the business about trying to create that support with other people so that the difference would allow their work to be done.

Makeda noted that often groups and service providers in the community have a difficult time understanding what she as a resource person and the Imani Family Center can tangibly contribute. The process seems kind of fuzzy to them.

Some other organizations simply don't believe that what we do is immensely valuable because we don't deliver services. There are many organizations that believe that the delivery of services is the, what do you call it, is the determiner of whether what you do is valuable. Because we don't keep children, we don't give out food, we don't pay utility bills, so what's the good of talking, so there are a lot people who really don't get the need for dialogue with reflection and discernment and these are things that I learned in great part from religious communities. That part of that model came from the nuns that I worked with and others, the American friends service committee, the Mennonites, you know, Sacred Heart Southern, these groups over the years. So some groups don't value the work that we do because it is subtle.

In order to help them get past these perceptions they look for opportunities to collaborate with other organizations with similar values. They use the Circles of Hope process to begin communicating with potential collaborators in a way that is respectful to the Circle. In this manner they are better able work with other organizations and these organizations are better able to understand WomanSpirit. Mutual understanding makes it possible to work together on issues where they may have common interests.

Some of the organizations we are able to work, sometimes as part of collaborations around an issue, sometimes we can be on an educational

panel in which we mutually inform one another. Sometimes we're part of a coalition that's intended to do something around policy and legislation so there are a variety of ways but you have to know who you are, what your strengths are, what you wish to contribute, and you have to have a general understanding of how other organizations work for that to be successful and for you not to feel demeaned or less than useful because your contribution may be different.

The themes and ideas that Makeda has expressed in this section not only provide insights into Makeda's world and reveal some of her perspectives on the Circles of Hope process but her role as the principal designer and facilitator of the process illustrate how she uses the processes with others and provides a foundation for analyzing the other stories. The other women in this study have a different perspective. They experience the Circles of Hope either as facilitators or participants. In the next section we will look at the experiences of three women who primarily see themselves as facilitators of the Circles of Hope process.

#### *Case Study Interviews: Part II the Facilitators*

The stories presented in this section are framed primarily by the experiences of the woman as facilitators of the process. They also discuss their perspectives as participants but primarily view themselves as facilitators of the process. Many of the stories and experiences are tied to their role as facilitators.

The first case study is Aeshe. She has worked with the Circles of Hope process for nearly eight years. She has been a friend of Makeda's for many years. She has taken the Circles of Hope and facilitated Circles through other organizations and groups. She is part of several Circles through WomanSpirit and it is through those Circles that she receives much of the support she needs to work with her groups. Debbie has been both a regular participant in Circles at the Imani Family Center and works as a community

activist for a statewide agency. She often plays support roles in her work with Makeda and others at Imani and applies what she has learned to her advocacy work. Danielle has been an active participant in Circles for a couple of years and as a volunteer. Her interest is really becoming better able to lead her own Circles and frames some of her experiences around her efforts to start her new youth programs that incorporate the Circles.

These women have a rich set of experiences that illustrates the role the Circles of Hope plays in their lives and their efforts to apply their understanding of how the process works to their efforts to establish Circles in other parts of the Community.

*Aeshe*

Aeshe got directly involved with the Circles of Hope about 7 or 8 years ago but she actually goes back to “before the beginning” with the Circles of Hope. She and Makeda were good friends and used to engage in long discussions on the telephone about how to develop a way of connecting and reaching out to the community. “We had done hours and hours of that [talking about how to reach out to the community] and she had gone ahead and gave birth to it.” There were many problems that they thought needed addressing but they just need a way to reach out and get involved. They lost track of each other for a time and when Aeshe caught up with her a few years later after Makeda had put it all together.

I was excited so I came over and at that time she was doing some training sessions where she gave us all sort of like the womanspirit format and that was kind of nice. I had some background and training in a job that I had. I had to get up and do the seminars and facilitate so I had that background and this just fit right in.

Aeshe is retired and lives on a fixed income. The Circles of Hope provides a framework and support system for her that she uses to stay engaged in her communities

and provides something she can offer those in the communities where she is active. She has a passion for people and helping create positive change for people in difficult situations.

Aeshe's relationship to the Circles of Hope revolves around several key themes. The first is problem solving. She believes the process needs to take people toward some sort of action or change that will help them find solutions to the issues they face. Another theme is reinforcement and credibility. Aeshe does not have any formal credentials so having WomanSpirit and the Circles of Hope behind her gives her credibility in the community for the work that she does that would not otherwise be available to her. Experiential learning is an important value for Aeshe and is reflected in how she connects her experience and history to the issues of the day. She believes that there is a lot of untapped wisdom that the Circles of Hope help people connect to in ways that can help combat isolation and resolve problems. Links to faith discusses how she connects her faith to her work through the Circles. Simplify is a multifaceted theme that includes her use of the process and the support system to simplify her life in a way that makes her more available to others. When she feels safe, she can let go of the things that she collects and make her gifts more available to others. Sometimes she does this literally and other times she does it figuratively. Participation is the final theme. Aeshe uses her skills in facilitation to help people become engaged and get involved in the community.

*Problem solving.* Aeshe believes that the Circles of Hope is primarily a problem solving tool. It works for her personally and she has used the Circles of Hope process as a vehicle for her own work with others. For her own personal use it is the support she mentions time after time that is valuable to her. She sees herself as fairly self reliant in terms of being able to address her own problems. At one point in her life she suffered from manic depression and through her own resolve and the inspiration of others she



was able to recover. What she receives from the Circles of Hope is a place she can call on or go to when she needs a little support. The energy and support of the Circle never fails to lift her spirits.

It's mainly a problem solving tool as I see it. A couple of times when I saw it personally I remembered the things we have gone over and I know that they are here. That I can call and nobody's used to beat me down so immediately I get up when I call and talk to them because they're not going to believe I'm having a bad month for example because I suffer from manic depression and I hope it's ok to say that and it would be cruel to me if I would allow to be.

Aeshe wants to put what she learns in a Circle into action and the process itself provides her with some of the tools she can use to work with her groups to actually implement the ideas that are developed. This is very gratifying to Aeshe. She has learned that they are able to do many things and by utilizing the process and the other resources available to them they are able to make a difference.

We used to talk about all these grandiose dreams and I didn't really think they would basically be implemented. It [the work they have done in the Circles] comes out as the realization of a dream. It's a real dream come true because we did not have any money Steve and guess what? We still don't have any money. We have learned we are rich; we are blest; we learned that it just doesn't always take money.

One of Aeshe's success stories is with a group called Alley Oops. Alley Oops was a group of men she worked with who were homeless and spent a lot of time scavenging. Aeshe is a flea marketer and found a connection with these men and used that to build a relationship with them. She started a Circle for them and called it Alley Oops. Aeshe bought some of the items they collected, prepared meals for them, and set

up a support system. Eventually she had to stop because the health department did not want her serving food, but for a time she was able to serve as an important connection to these men using some of the same skills she learned in her own Circles.

One issue she got involved with through her Circle at Imani concerned youth and gun violence. They were concerned about young people being hurt because they were playing with toy guns that were being mistaken for real guns. What Aeshe did was organize a buy-back program where they bought back the kids' toy guns. The toys looked so real that they were afraid the kids would get themselves killed just playing around in the neighborhood.

The gun buy-back is my free market deal. Kids came in with guns, they were play guns but they looked so real. I bought them from the guys. I said, these will get you killed. Then Makeda had a big one. At dignity house we did a play, a skit and the kids brought their weapons and we gave them toys...We got their knives and... it was done in the circle. It takes a lot of time and energy and investment. It got good newspaper coverage...then the police were buying back guns. You could really work it. The kids loved it.

Aeshe said that when she first got involved with the Circles of Hope she "wanted to save the world"; I think she still wants to do that. Her action orientation serves as a motivation for her to keep working on things that she has yet to figure out how to resolve but she is always seeking new ways that she can play a positive role in people's lives.

Her current passion is a concern for the future of black men. She does not believe that they receive the right kind of support they need to make good choices about what they do with their lives.

I still have not been able to reach or find a group that would help me reach out to some people that really, really could use some help but it's

really not there for them, like the guy that shot the cop in Kirkwood. This guy, I pray for him. He has ruined his life but somewhere down the road there could have been some intervention and I know that there's more out there than him but it's just ... I primarily focus on black males, although I am not eliminating anyone, but there is nowhere for them to go I would love to have something to reach out.

Later in the interview she mentioned that over the next year she believes she will establish a program for some of these men. She knows what she wants to do but still needs to pull together some of the resources.

*Reinforcement and credibility.* Aeshe describes herself as self-educated. She did go to college and completed courses but was not really focused on getting a degree. She had too many interests and was not able to decide what she wanted to do so her academic career included a hodgepodge of different courses. She viewed herself as a generalist and never really found a niche in the academic arena where she was comfortable enough to focus her energy on getting a degree. The Circle really served as the place where she developed herself and her skills as a facilitator.

It's really, really good to have something with a maturity to have something like this to lean on since I didn't get it formally (education). I'm basically self educated. Although I have done a lot of going to college and taking courses and different things like that I never could particularly decide what I wanted to do when I grew up and even now I would have a hard time focusing in on a subject to go and get say a Ph.D. in because I am more of a generalist.

The Circles of Hope is designed to tap into the knowledge and wisdom of the group. In a way the Circle provides a similar kind of validation for her that a degree would. Her affiliation with WomanSpirit and the Imani Family Center provide a credential

that has value in the community. She has been able to use that credential to establish herself as a valued facilitator of the process in the community. However, it is the ongoing support and reinforcement that she receives from the Circles and WomanSpirit that back her up the most

They [the Circle] gave me more nerve and the feedback I've gotten is positive which kind of lets you know you're on the right course. And as I said earlier the support was always there if I fell. Without being credentialized, a lot of times it's a big handicap for your own self confidence although you know, you know, that you know...if you have no way to validate it so sometimes you would believe you're challenged and you have to just downright say that you know and leave it at that. Some people will take it or leave it. Most people will take it. Because after all you are standing there, you validate yourself and you must never forget that.

Aeshe does not lack confidence and she has taken a number of risks with the types of groups that she has chosen to work with. The support that she receives from WomanSpirit and the Circles of Hope process has helped her develop her skills in the facilitating process and that in turn has given her more confidence in her ability to work with others. She notes that being part of a Circle has given her opportunities to enhance her speaking skills, become a better listener, and become more assertive in her abilities to work with others. Because of this she feels secure in her abilities to facilitate the process with others in the community.

Aeshe describes a number of occasions where she has had the opportunity to facilitate groups outside the Circles because of her skills with the Circles of Hope. When she does this work she tends to use many of the elements of the Circles of Hope in her work as a facilitator. One group she does a lot of volunteer work with is called OASIS.

It is a program designed to get seniors active. Aeshe is a volunteer facilitator for some of their groups. They have their own process for facilitating their group meetings and Aeshe works within their guidelines but takes many liberties with it and incorporates many of the elements of the Circle into their process.

I use it with Oasis all the time. They are very similar to the circles but not exactly like it. I didn't originate the format they [OASIS] give us an agenda and all sorts of stuff but it's volunteer work; it's meeting people and I love it and you're supposed to do one a month.

Her first group with Oasis was a group that had been facilitated by a woman who had not been able to get anything productive going. In her first meeting as their facilitator they had a great time. This reinforced her own belief in how well the process worked at getting people engaged and thinking about how they can approach things for themselves. This type of reinforcement from her groups and the support of the Circles at Imani provided her with the credentials she needed to stay connected to the community in a meaningful way.

They have their plan and they are not identical of course so I just adapt them and I do well on mine and I've done groups that other people left because they said it wasn't a good fit. One of my best is one that a lady said that they just could never get anything going. She came back, and I took it, that was my first group and we had a ball.

*Experiential learning.* Experiential learning is a complicated subject when it comes to Aeshe. She learns by doing. She has an orientation to action and getting results that have placed a premium on experiences that she knows works. The Circles is a good venue for learning but also works very well for teaching because it allows her to draw on her considerable experience and wisdom.

She draws on her own personal history or things she learned as a child for the wisdom she needs to get through the issues she has faced as an adult. For instance, when she was struggling with her manic depression she took inspiration from the stories of Abraham Lincoln that she studied as a little girl, noting that Abraham Lincoln, in describing his own battles with manic depression, said “people are about as happy as they make up their minds to be.” She decided she would be happy.

Aeshe describes the Circles of Hope as a place where she is able to learn and share practical ways of doing things. She uses the Circles of Hope process as a way of sharing her experience with others even when she is part of a group where she is ostensibly a participant. For example, Aeshe has a grandchild that is suffering from a mental illness and she went with daughter and granddaughter to a series of support group and educational meetings on how to deal with the illness. She was there as a participant but could not resist the temptation to turn some of the meetings into Circles.

My daughter attended absolutely all sessions because it's her child that's affected. I just attended maybe  $\frac{1}{2}$  to  $\frac{3}{4}$  of them because I turned the meetings into Circles when I went and I didn't know how right that was or how well it went but they seemed to be real perky. I got lots of complements and they did invite me to facilitate them but it's like too much work for my stamina at the moment.

Aeshe believes that most people have within them the resources they need to take care of their own issue and problems. Distractions and the investment of resources that do not make sense to her take people away from looking within themselves and instead concentrate on other things.

With all our riches I don't understand why we don't better serve the people. I just don't and I think that resources are innately within most people to solve their own problems but there's a lot of things out there

that deter it like television and the overselling of things all the time. I mean it's bad for society as a whole.

What people are missing is the support necessary to be successful. From her perspective the type of learning that goes on in a Circle tapping into the wisdom of a group of peers, is how people are better able to make their own changes.

*Links to faith.* Aeshe, like some of the others, often makes reference to her faith when talking about the Circles of Hope. In some ways her work in the community is an extension of her faith and being part of the Circle allows her to express herself in ways that reflect that part of who she is. While the process is not faith driven Aeshe and some of the other women are motivated by their faith to do some of the things they do for each other, members of the broader community, and the organization. Aeshe believes faith is a principal ingredient of a Circle.

Main ingredients are faith and the maturity has a lot to do with that. It's strange how in America, a youth driven society, they overlook the wisdom of the elders and it would help a lot if you used it more.

WomanSpirit is considered a faith-based organization though it is non-denominational. The women share their faith practices with one another and the Imani Family Center was described as sacred by Aeshe.

We consider this sacred ground and the fact that the lord made it available. Of course you know our background is really strictly religious. Makeda and I both have a Baptist background and its real serene and, and almost like home. It's welcoming and it's also decorated mostly with gifts and it all comes together as if we went out and shopped for them (giggling). I think the Holy Spirit looked over it, yeah, I do. I think he looked over it. It's a real special place—in and out. The garden's wonderful, even down to the mosquitoes.

In this passage she is referring to the religious history of the place with the Ursuline Sisters. She and others in the group feel that their use of the facility has maintained the spiritual integrity of the place and that gives her energy. The Imani Family Center is decorated with pictures and artwork donated by people who have been guests, fellow travelers, and participants in their programs. Even though most things are second-hand there is a feeling of safety and serenity that people feel when they are there and Aeshe taps into that when she is there.

Another aspect of faith that shows up in her work is her application of her faith to the work that she chooses to do. She is somewhat critical of some of the religions for not being more engaged in addressing issues or problems in the community but is also wary of engaging them too much in community problem solving because she believes that people place expectations on their churches to solve their problems when they should be more self-reliant. In a conversation about some of the religious denominations and their lack of involvement in community affairs she notes:

It could be a matter of outreach but I think it's more of a lack of an understanding of the traditional religions and that they haven't solved the problems. The people want their religion to solve their problems. I realize that they have to solve their problems.

She believes that many of the mainstream religions are losing people to other more marginal faith traditions because they are staying away from community problem solving and those that are growing are doing so because they embrace that even though it may not be a healthy alternative for many people.

Finally, faith helps Aeshe take on issues in her daily life that make it possible for her to continue to participate in community life even though her health and finances do not give her much freedom to pick and choose what she does. It is her faith that God will provide for her that keeps her doing things that many of her peers feel are risky.



I was talking to one lady and I saw her fears and she wouldn't dare go out everyday because of how high the cost of gas is ...I don't let that stop me from reaching out to others because I think the lord will provide, number 1, no much gas goes up, if it goes up to \$10 a gallon I am going to have to have one gallon of it.

*Simplify.* To simplify has several meanings for Aeshe, one relates to the process itself. She sees the process as a way of helping equalize people which made it easier for folks to relate to one another and better able to see things more clearly. Another aspect of simplification is support. The support that Aeshe receives from some of the others in the Circle make it possible for her to let go of some of her things and her secrets so that she can share both with some of the others in the group. Simplify also refers to how she thinks the process helps people cut through extraneous influences that keep people from getting to the heart of an issue.

The way that Aeshe describes the Circles of Hope process goes a long way in helping understanding her perspective on the process and why she values it:

Well, that it was easy to master and also easy to convey to others that it was gentle and soft and slow and kind, it didn't threaten people. That everyone who could comprehend any amount of decorum is welcome and we met no strangers and people received it so well they almost didn't let me finish talking to them ...I loved it, yeah. So it kind of put us all on the same level. If we had stuff, we could share it without intimidation, and didn't see a lot of hoarding, selfishness and its real sweet.

She is describing the simplicity with which the process works and that simplicity is attractive to people because it is easy to understand and it works as a way of communicating about issues people are concerned about. The key to the process for Aeshe is the support. She can count on the support for tangible items like money to buy

gas when she really needs it or she can talk to someone on the phone that can help her solve a problem she is working with or trying to help someone else resolve. On one occasion she was trying to help a woman who was having trouble with some foster kids who were in her care. The children were telling lies to the State agency that oversaw her work and the State agency was coming down on her because of the complaints from the kids. Aeshe was searching for an appropriate response for this person and called someone else in the Circle and who suggested that this woman give the kids back to the State. "She (the person she called) said, 'Give them back'. Get out of the foster care business because they were going to ruin her reputation. Then she would have been taken out of it anyway." One's reputation is a very important to many of the women who participate in the Circles of Hope and as a group they help each other protect their reputations.

Simplify for Aeshe also means to divest herself of some of her things. She is a self-proclaimed packrat and she talked extensively about all the things that she has collected over the years at flea markets, auctions, and garage sales. She has collected lots of stuff. The stuff is a type of security blanket for Aeshe so when she talks about giving it away she is also talking about how she does not need the security of the possessions the same way she once did. She is feeling secure enough to let some of her things go.

We talk and sometimes I come to the conclusion, when I see what other people do that I don't need something that I've been holding on to.

Sometimes there is someone available that needs it in a Circle or someone around that I see. Then if I think that we're all stewards actually all the stuff that comes our way is not for us anyway. We just can't have everything, although I try.

The Circles help her let go of her things and the confidence that comes from that makes it possible for her to be more giving.

Oh, probably, its probably emotional, I'm calm enough to do it. I don't need it, I don't want it, and somebody else can use it. The same thing with being patient with people, talking with people, not being so critical, letting people have there space and there power. It's real important. Some people have been tossed and turned, don't value themselves. One of the most amazing things I see from the Circles is the self confidence from it because you don't get any recriminations when you come out of it, you get help. Kind of strengthens you for the next time.

The Circles has a kind of a calming effect on Aeshe and that makes it possible for her to relax enough to see how she might be able to contribute to whatever happens to be on the agenda. Aeshe acknowledges that the support of the Circle has made it possible for her to be more productive. When asked if the Circles have helped her she replied "I am sure it has because I am more focused ...Getting rid of baggage, emotional and physical. My decision-making is swifter. I was more of a procrastinator in the past."

*Participation.* Aeshe believes that if a person sees something happening in the community that they live in and can do something about they should try to do something. She often participates by serving as group facilitator, helping people find answers to their questions but her value for participation goes beyond her role as a facilitator.

You don't have to be a facilitator, like I'm doing this group tomorrow but I could pass out flyers for someone else that was doing it or I could make phone calls or greet people at the door so active is being active.

Aeshe's perspective is that a person should figure out how to make a contribution even if that contribution is not something they would normally do.

Another aspect of participation is participation within the group. The Circles of Hope process is structured to give everyone a chance to speak and gives equal time to all the participants ensuring that no one person's opinion overshadows another. A barometer for Aeshe in terms of how well the process is working is the interconnectivity of the group. If the process is going well the participants are engaged, respectful, mutually supportive and encouraged to share their ideas and issues. Normally in a Circle after all the business of the Circle for that day has been accomplished there will be a "go-around" where everyone is given a set amount of time to share something that is on their mind. Often what people share relates directly to the work of the Circle that day but it does not have to. In one instance she recalled a woman sharing in a "go-around" that her husband of 25 years was leaving her. In Aeshe's words the group was "buffooned".

I thought it was particularly interesting that she felt comfortable enough to share that with us and I was really glad that we were there for her. It seemed like it was affecting us more than it was affecting her [laugh]...I think that helped her, it helped us all her sharing that because that's a common problem for essentially older women and she didn't know what she was going to do. Well, and I kept thinking, what if I...what if that happened to me...what would I do?

In this case the evidence of the interconnectivity occurred when the woman felt safe enough to reach out to the group with her problem and the group responded by offering her their support. Aeshe was affected personally in that she understood and connected with what the woman was going through and she even thought about what she would do in that same situation.

A third aspect of participation is using the process to get people to do things. Sometimes it is problem solving such as working as a group to offer support to the

woman whose marriage just ended and other times it is simply getting people more involved in activities that they are interested in pursuing. Aeshe's work with OASIS where she facilitates sessions with groups of seniors is often centered on facilitating discussions about things that interest the seniors and may sometimes lead to projects that related to those interests.

People want to make positive contributions to their community. Aeshe recognizes this and knows that if she is able to maintain a positive attitude and keep people focused on the positive in a situation and participates herself that others will as well.

If an opportunity comes up for me to do something positive I'll do it because they're having concerts in the park right up next me and a lot of people don't feel like going. One thing you really have to listen to is for negative comments by people, they want to knock something down instead of build it up so I sometimes can participate.

*Debbie*

Debbie first became engaged with the Circles of Hope in the summer of 2000 while working for a regional planning agency that contracted with WomanSpirit to develop a mentoring program. Debbie was the project supervisor. She spent a lot of time at the Imani Family Center and eventually got involved in some of their other activities.

I was working for [a regional planning agency] in the summer of 2000 and Makeda came to work there. She was hired to do a project for welfare to work in mentoring. Our supervisor asked me to manage Makeda's project. He came over here [Imani Family Center] with me a few times and we met here, he introduced us and then we began working on what we thought would be a

handbook for mentoring ...so we spent a lot of time working on that and then we—I just began to come over here and Makeda began including me in other activities that she was having.

The contract ended after one year and Debbie moved on to other projects where she could engage more directly in advocacy work than she was able to do at the regional planning agency but she maintained her relationship with Makeda and her involvement in WomanSpirit and the Circles of Hope process.

Debbie is the only one participating in the study that actually has a paid position working with a nonprofit community-based organization. She has participated in many of the events sponsored by WomanSpirit since 2001 and has a specific interest in dialogues concerning issues affecting public policy regarding healthcare, involving low income people, and considering tax and fiscal policy.

Several themes emerged during the interview. The first theme is exposure to diverse people, ideas, cultures, and concepts. It explores how the Circles of Hope have made it possible to meet and interact with people from a variety of cultures and places. The second theme is a framework for having meaningful conversations. This theme looks at how Debbie has experienced the process and how she sees it as an effective tool for engaging people in meaningful dialogue in her work. Exploring interconnections includes Debbie's reflections on how the process has helped her see issues from a broader perspective and how that new perspective has shaped her view of policy development. Debbie has a keen interest in looking at issues of identity. Exploring Identity is a theme that considers how the Circles of Hope have helped her better understand the intersections of race, culture, class, and economic status. The fifth theme is working with the public and encountering diverse perspectives. This theme looks at how Debbie has used what she learned from her experiences in the Circles of Hope to shape public policy and explains how the skills that she has developed through the

dialogues in the Circles have helped when she encounters groups of people in public setting with perspectives different from hers. The final theme is engaging people in policy development. Debbie reflects on how the Circles of Hope has shaped her passion for getting people, grassroots people, more involved in policy development.

*Exposure to diverse people, ideas, cultures, and concepts.* Diversity is an aspect of participating in a Circle that really stands out about the Circles of Hope for Debbie. Most Circles involve a cross-section of the community but there are many types of Circles as well and all reflect some diversity in the community. One of her favorite Circles was a group called WomanThink, which was a cross-cultural group of women that explored various issues and topics affecting the development of women. This particular group included women of different educational backgrounds, races, ethnic identities, incomes, and cultural perspectives. On several occasions Debbie mentioned that she appreciated the diversity of the people that came to the Imani Family Center to participate in Circles and other events.

I've met physicians, women physicians from Russia; I've met Kenyans including Wangari Maathai; I've met people from the poorest parts of St. Louis that I never would have ever been able to meet otherwise and I've met people from other organizations across the country, across the United States who are in all kinds of different organizations. I mean from women's groups to policy think tanks. So it's eclectic.

The diversity of people and perspectives has changed how Debbie views the world. The diversity she has been exposed to helped her to see how things are connected in society. She has found a relationship between what happens at the local level in a community and policy development in society. Debbie was pretty well engaged in discussions about public policy in society but did not have the perspective of the local person who has to live with the policies developed. The diversity of faces that

participate in any given Circle exposed her to many local, cross-cultural perspectives helping her to better understand the impacts of public policy on individuals.

I think my view of the world has greatly changed because coming here really expanded my gut feeling that everything was connected but it really taught me, I really learned how everything was connected because Makeda was so big on how the macro and the micro worlds are connected

*Framework for having meaningful conversations.* Debbie really values the structure of the process and its use as a forum for exploring complex issues. She believes that the framework and structure of a Circle makes it possible to facilitate meaningful discussions that can help people see a broader range of views on an issue and develop appropriate strategies.

...it [the Circle] provides a structure for that [meaningful conversations] because I think that a lot of times when people are talking about things that they are concerned about it's good to be able to get the feelings off your chest, which is part of the Circle, kind of like what's going on, what's happening, but then it also let's you give a context to it because no one really gives you advice but what people say is there are things we could do...then you're left with some kind of framework about how you may want to approach whatever issues of concern that you have as opposed to just bitching and then not doing anything about it...and it also is a way that people can really talk about things that they are very personally concerned about without feeling much pressure, without feeling scared that someone's going to be judging them.

There are several key elements incorporated in the structure that make the process work for Debbie. One is that everyone's input into the process is respected so



participants are thinking more respectfully about each other during a dialogue causing them to focus on what they want to say in a manner that is clear and understandable to everyone. Focus is another element that comes from participation in the Circle. The process makes it possible for participants to focus in on core issues.

...and that to me [focus] is important, to be able to really kind of push away all the side issues and get to the core of things. The process really helps you do that because...you know you have an opportunity to talk and you want to make it useful to yourself but you also want everyone else... to be able to participate.

During a Circle all participants will have an opportunity to share their perspectives. They are constrained by a time limit and often need to speak to a particular topic but everyone has an opportunity to speak. This structure tends to equalize the participants and cause them to focus on what is important to them about whatever topic they are discussing. The structure of a Circle is important to Debbie in her work in public policy development because it helps people understand public policy as it is developing in the community, explore those policies and their impact on people and make choices about what they feel are appropriate policies and what they believe are not. It helps people become engaged in part of the public policy debate.

I think it's the structure. The three kind of questions or three areas, the "what's going well", "what's challenging", and "what support would make a difference" because they can apply to almost anything really, any problem or concern a person has...In my work primarily but also though, in my personal life, in especially my own spiritual journeys because I have been quite interested in a variety of spiritual input and it also helps give you a context for that.

Debbie's work as a healthcare policy advocate has provided her a number of opportunities to work with groups using the Circles of Hope process and she has taken advantage of these opportunities. The way Debbie facilitates the process is not the same as a Circle because in most forums she works with groups that are only together for a short time and are not likely to continue their work and discussions together once the forum is ended. Some may continue their work outside the forum but because of the societal nature of her work there are fewer opportunities for her to work in a Circle setting to build trusting relationships among the participants. Nevertheless, she has found it helpful and has used variations on the three questions to get people to think more broadly about a topic or issue.

it specifically gave people an opportunity to say what they thought was good, what they thought was hurting people and what they thought they might be able to do differently or to do in general...that gives them a framework to think about it [the impact of policy choices] because you always want to remember that no matter how bad things are there are good things too. Or no matter how good things are there's things that you can work on so it provides a balance too I think, to the discussion.

*Exploring interconnections.* One of the learning outcomes for Debbie has been the capacity to see how things are related. She is a policy advocate with an interest in improving conditions for the poor and marginalized. Her training and experience prior to becoming part of a Circle had focused on how to develop specific actions that she believed would create positive change such as getting a new law passed that would provide a new benefit or stopping a bad change in the law that will negatively affect her constituency. What she learned through the Circles is societal change is more complicated than simply changing a few laws or implementing new programs.

I started learning where those ideas were coming from so I started thinking in terms of well when you hear welfare to work what does that mean. Well 10 years ago somebody had this idea that we needed to end it [welfare] and so then I can go back and see the intellectual history of that idea and see then how that affected the culture and vice versa. It started helping me to define more how I believe that social change could occur because before I really felt that it occurred through different types of advocacy and you know basic main stream models that everybody understands but what I started to learn was that it has to happen on all the different levels from the grassroots all the way to the top.

The Circles helped her make these connections in a couple of ways. First of all in a Circle the group tends to look at issues from multiple perspectives in order to better understand what the issues are, where they come from, who benefits, who loses, and what the long-term impacts are likely to be on the Circle. They can do that because they are looking at their own experiences with the issue and collecting information as they need it. Another way that it helped her to connect things was because of the diversity of the perspectives she was able to encounter in the various Circles where she was a participant. When she visited with women from other parts of the country and other parts of the world she found similarities in some of the issues and differences in how they were perceived and addressed in a variety of cultural contexts.

when you hear dialogue from other women in other countries you get an idea clearly how their economy operates and the social structure...so you start to see patterns and in those patterns some things are worse. For example, for the women in Russia [some things are worse] than they are here but they also have a lot, they have things that we don't have so then you can start comparing and ...learning about different, other political

movements in other countries and how women had accomplished things...then I can compare that back to what I've done and what I'm trying to do and look for the things that were, you know similar, but also look for the ways that they did things differently and how that helped them make those accomplishments.

She is also able to see more clearly how policies developed in this country to benefit certain groups in the US may have different consequences in other places, consequences that she had not considered before. She spoke at length about how she saw corporate America spreading itself throughout the world and using its influence with not only the government in the United States but elsewhere and the effect this is having on the communities where they have a presence. Her thinking has shifted to the point that now she is looking at how changes made at the local level are shaping policies as well as how macro-policies made on a national or transnational level are playing out in neighborhoods and communities.

*Exploring identity.* Debbie has an interest in race, gender, culture, economics, and politics. Growing up she was taught that racism would not exist anymore. When she got older and realized it was important she wanted to learn more about how others saw issues of race. WomanSpirit has offered many opportunities for that kind of learning formally in the context of a Circle and informally within the context of the relationships developed in the Circles. The Circles of Hope was developed by African American women so that they could address important issues on their own terms, develop their own understanding of issues base on where they found themselves in society, contradict perceptions of low-income women as victims, and create a culture of learning that better reflected who they were as predominantly low-income, African-American women. This was attractive to Debbie who wanted to learn more about how African-American women lived and had a passion for working on issues of poverty. The Circle provided a safe

forum to explore issues of identity and some of the relationships and projects that emerged from those discussion provided opportunities for Debbie to learn more about race and its impact on the women in the Circle.

I've got to really spend time with African American people, and really know them, really see the difference, how they live their lives and I know where they go to church and what they do for holidays—all the things that you don't think about that you don't really know about people and ...that's been an important part of my education and I am absolutely interested in that too. I just think I'm really fortunate that I actually got to see it firsthand because most people don't.

The opportunity to participate in exchanges or dialogues with people from a variety of cultures at the Imani Family Center has been a valued part of the learning experience for Debbie. She sees herself playing a couple of roles in this context. First, she is a learner trying to soak up as much as she can from other participants in the Circle in order to better understand their views and life experiences. Second, she gets to explore some of her own identity issues in a safe place. For instance, in addition to race she spoke extensively about politics. She does not identify with either of the political parties active in the United States. She finds herself left on many issues but has problems with the leadership of the political parties on the left believing the leadership to be lacking fundamental values of decency.

I think some of our [hers and those of the leftist political party] values are similar but they treat their employees really bad—I mean they do a lot of things that I just think, that I don't agree with at all so I think my—so that has been an important thing for me is to be able to not identify so much with a political party but with a perspective on humanity.

*Working with the public and encountering diverse perspectives.* Debbie's work and passions often put her in situations where she is facilitating or addressing groups of people in public. She has already discussed how the structure has provided her with a framework for managing meaningful public discussions. However, she has also learned a lot about herself and people through her experiences with the Circles of Hope process that make her more effective in situations where she deals with the public. She has developed a capacity and appreciation for public discussion of difficult issues. On the one hand she is better able to articulate her perspective having shaped in discussions with her peers in the context of a Circle and on the other hand she is better equipped to listen more carefully to the perspectives that other might have making it possible for her to have productive conversations with groups of people that otherwise would have been difficult.

Being able to really talk about the issue and not talk about the things that make people angry which are often underlying issues or side issues and so it's helped me to be more...at least be able to have discussions with people who are in direct opposition to what I believe in and yet walk away from the discussion with a person and still respect them...there's an impression that people who are liberal, whatever, lefties, they're all a bunch of, you know, flag burning, we hate the military, all the things they portray as being crazy and it's been extremely valuable to me to be able to articulate what I believe in a way that I can then walk away from people and have them scratch their heads kind of and think well that's really not what I expected...

Due to her association with the Circles of Hope Debbie has been able to explore important issues at great depth with people of different races, ethnicities, cultural backgrounds and religious affiliation. She has developed a greater understanding of

how certain policies and programs affect people who are not necessarily engaged in the public dialogue. She does not speak for them but her experiences with a variety of perspectives make her better able to ask good questions of policymakers. As she noted above she's not trying to inflame their passions but get them to scratch their heads and think more broadly about the impacts of their decisions and possibly seek out the people who may be affected by their decisions.

I think that it [the Circles of Hope] teaches people not to be isolated in how they think...you get so much information here about how other people live that you can then try to be more inclusive and also be more respectful of other people even if you don't agree with them. You don't have to like them, you know what I mean, but it's important to be respectful of them.

Breaking down the isolation in how people think also opens them up to a greater range of possibilities in terms of how they address an issue because they have a broader perspective on what the issue actually is and are better able to look at the core causes of the problem and where there might be common ground amongst competing interests.

Debbie has been working for an organization that is opposed to many of the Medicaid changes that have taken place in Missouri in recent years. Part of her work has been to measure public perceptions of Medicaid. How do people feel about it? Do they believe it is effective? Are they willing to pay for? To this end they conducted an extensive survey of Missouri residents. Debbie traveled across the State discussing their findings with different groups. On one occasion she was invited to address a conservative business organization who she was pretty sure was not going to be a friendly audience but she went anyway and engaged in extensive dialogue with them about what the issues were, trying to break through some of the political stereotypes that

were emerging on the issue. She felt like she was able to help them see the issue as more complex and as a result they were more amenable to discussing a broader range of options in terms of how to address healthcare for the elderly and poor. She credited the Circles of Hope process with making it possible for her to play that role.

I helped to kind of break it down for them so that their stereotypes about or their ingrained perception of what the situation was... actually it wasn't that simple. Then, when people have to start thinking, understanding things are more complex, then they become more malleable and so it enabled me to then have a very civilized, respectful conversation with them and I wouldn't have been able to do that had I not spent the time with the Circles and the process and then also just that learning—the education.

*Engaging people in policy development.* Debbie has developed a value for engaging a broader segment of the population in policy development and implementation. She is critical of those who develop policy that believe they know what is best for other people and do not get people involved in policy development. They do not seek out those voices they want to represent. When policymakers do seek out other perspectives they tend to discount those opinions because the people are not as well educated, articulate and informed. What the Circles of Hope has been able to do is get many people involved without giving one person's opinion more weight than another. This is something important to Debbie.

Circles of Hope can have people who—I don't know their educational levels—but I am assuming maybe never graduated from high school to people who have doctorates and there's—and yet there's no elitism because everybody's the same you know it's because everyone's opinion is counted at the table. Nobody's gets more weight. So then, you're able



to really come up with some interesting things because then you can have—take wisdom from everyone.

Debbie said that social change begins when people are able to consider other opinions and ideas. Change is not possible until people are receptive to new ideas and ways of perceiving issues. One of the strengths of the Circles of Hope process for her is that the model is inclusive, egalitarian, nonjudgmental and able to create an atmosphere of trust where people are able to share their opinions and feel safe doing so. They are also able to listen and consider the perspectives of others that may be different from their own.

The Medicaid project that Debbie has been working on has also provided her an opportunity to engage the public in shaping opinions about the policy changes that are taking place. Through her organization they have been collecting data and conducting polls trying to get a better sense of what people thought about reducing Medicaid benefits to balance the State's budget. Most people 70% to 80% thought it was a bad idea. Through the polling and other engagement efforts they have managed to get people thinking and talking about the topic and getting engaged.

...people start hearing about it and then they start thinking about it and then pretty soon their input has become very important and quite frankly the legislators already would like to distance themselves from what they've done because they realize it's extremely unpopular...

### *Danielle*

Danielle is a volunteer for WomanSpirit, frequent participant in many of the Circles offered at the Imani Family Center, and community activist. Danielle is a self-employed business person who has been around WomanSpirit for about 5 years. She was referred to the organization by a friend who thought she had a lot to offer the organization as a volunteer. Danielle is someone who is engaged in her community

through her church and volunteer activities. Since joining WomanSpirit Danielle has been involved in a number of the projects WomanSpirit has undertaken as well as learned how to write grants, make international travel arrangements and facilitate dialogues. She has moved from someone who is primarily a participant in a Circle towards that of a facilitator looking at ways to facilitate the process in other areas of her life and the community.

The Circles of Hope process has been valuable to her in own development and in making it possible for her to become more engaged in the community through her church and youth development activities. Her perspectives on the Circles of Hope are framed by five broad themes. The first theme is a passion for service and personal development. Danielle hopes that the sharing of her experiences and insights may help others grow and make better choices. The Circles have helped her to look more closely at her experiences and provided a forum for her to share some of her experiences with others in hopes that somebody else will benefit from her insights. Danielle also discusses how being part of a Circle has affected her own development and how she has used the process in her own personal relationships. The second theme is skills formation. She often spoke of how the learning she valued related to the development of specific skills useful to her in her own volunteer and professional work. She focuses a lot on learning how to work with small groups. The third theme focuses on new perspectives and the transformative effect participation in the Circles has had on her views of the world. Stepping out describes how she has applied the process in her own volunteer work with youth. The final theme of expanding her leadership focuses on how the process has helped her become part of a support network. She has learned that there is support there for her from the other women and volunteers and that she has the opportunity to reciprocate the support for others in her Circles.

*Passion for service and personal development.* Danielle is a service oriented person with deep spiritual and religious ties. One of the things that attracted her to the Circles of Hope was that she saw right from the beginning was that people were gaining something positive from participating in the process.

The very first time I went to a Circle, the women had so many breakthroughs just based on the prayer, the understanding of their situation better, and then seeing some light at the end of the tunnel. Oftentimes that doesn't happen. You go to things and you leave just as hopeless as you did when you came. But the first Circle I went to I saw women leaving with some hope.

She decided early on that she wanted to be a part of it and that she could help make a difference in other people's lives through her participation. She had something to contribute. This is important to Danielle. She saw the Circles of Hope as a forum where women helped each other and she wanted to be a part of it. Her passion for people and her desire to help motivated her to become a volunteer with the Imani Family Center and to participate in the Circles. What she enjoys most is seeing the women grow and she believes growth is possible because they feel safe and supported enough in the Circle to share the things keeping them down.

It makes me happy when I see other women sharing the deep down things that you really have to get up and out in order to deal with them so that's what makes me the most happy in a Circle to see them not be afraid to say it in front of other people because that's freeing for you, it really is and I think that we the people in the Circle are not going to judge you, think differently about you, when it's over or tell other people outside the Circle. To see that confidence, to see that trust, is the biggest thing for me.

The Circles of Hope experience has been valuable to Danielle in helping her better understand her own experiences and how those experiences can be used to help others.

When I sit in Circles I share things that I hope women will know that I've been there you can overcome that because look at me I'm a living witness that you can overcome some things and I'm not afraid to share some of the really, really ugly stuff in my life in hopes that it would help somebody else.

She believes that her experience in overcoming some of the challenges in her life can be offered as testimony for the other women in the group and illustrates that no matter how difficult the circumstances get they can overcome their challenges. It helps her build rapport and trust with others in the Circle and establishes the Circle as a safe place for sharing and enables Danielle to unearth and share memories and experiences that would be very difficult in other environments.

The process of sharing has enhanced her own understanding of some of the things she has faced in her life. For example, she shared a story about how when she was younger she had been in an abusive relationship. She survived that experience and feels that she has put it behind her but will discuss the experience in the context of a Circle because she believes that it is something she can offer to the other women. It is important to let them know they can survive and they can learn how to take care of themselves.

I liked to refer to it as a domestic abuse survivor because all women do not survive domestic abuse but that was a prison for me. Not the kind with the bars that you can see but it was still a prison and it helped me see that more clearly and how I could help young women try not to fall into that because it's really, before you know it, you don't realize it when

it's happening, and then once it gets to a point, and that person feels the fear in you, then you really don't—you're backed against the wall and you don't know what to do so I try to get young women to understand, don't let yourself get backed against the wall. If a man ever hits you then I don't care how sorry he says he is we need to go.

She shares her stories as a way of offering assistance to other women but there is also a personal benefit that comes from that experience in the form of a greater understanding of the role that she played in her own experiences.

It takes a long time to see your place in anything that goes on in your life because we're always so quick to make it somebody else's fault, somebody did this and somebody did that, but you never want to stop and say...get the mirror up there, what did I do? What was my role, what was my part, accept my responsibility. The Circles always help to bring those issues out. It's an inside out kind of thing. You come from the inside, you bring it out but then it really becomes about you. Even though you're helping somebody else you feel it becomes about you and your self examination.

In addition to an this introspective looks that result from her participation she is also able to use the process with her friends as a means of framing their own discussions when they get together and offer support to one another. There is a group of friends that she has been close to for more than 30 years. They meet every three months and use the Circles of Hope process as a way of sharing where they are in their lives and how things have changed. When asked to compare her own personal Circles to some of those that she has as part of WomanSpirit she said:

A lot of the people that come to the Circles here [at Imani] are very needy and I don't really experience as much of that in other groups as I do here.

They come here because they need, they really do need and sometimes the groups I'm with, we come together because we just want to.

Danielle distinguishes between what she does as a volunteer with WomanSpirit and what she does with her friends on her own time for her own reasons. The Circles she participates in at WomanSpirit are intense and often about a serious issue someone in the group is dealing with and often their purpose for participating in the Circle is to figure out how to respond effectively to a challenging situation. Many of these women have few support systems. Danielle has other support systems including her group of friends so when they get together and use the Circles of Hope process to guide their discussions the focus is less on exploring an issue or crisis management and more on exploring their own lives and relationships. In that context it is much less about addressing needs and more about maintaining and enriching social relationships.

*Skills formation.* Danielle has had a lot of opportunities through her association with WomanSpirit to develop skill sets that have become important to her. Her volunteer work at the Imani Family Center has helped her with things like writing grants and making international travel arrangements. These are two things she never imagined she would be doing before she became a volunteer at WomanSpirit but because they were needs of the organization and she had an interest in learning how to do these things so she took them on as something she could contribute to the organization. She became skilled at both. Other skills such as the ability to focus and work in small groups result directly from her participation in the Circles themselves.

Focus is important to Danielle because she is self-employed with limited resources. She needs to be able to focus on the key issues affecting her business and meet her other family and community obligations. Participating in a Circle helps her relax, distance herself from the immediate issues and get some perspective on those things she has the resources and capacity to address. The Circle helps her focus on the

important things and let go of other extraneous things so she can concentrate her energies on what she knows she has to get done.

It has really helped me become more focused and that was critical because I don't work a traditional job and because I don't work a traditional job it's more important for me to be focused now because in a job you can get up and go but now I have to go...I love it but it is a lot of work and some of the things I've learned here help me to stay focused in my business so I can make money and pay my bills.

The focus is valuable to her in her business and in her volunteer work. In talking about her work with young people, she noted that because she is able to focus on the learning that takes place in a Circle she is able to share with them (young people) some of the things that she learns as a participant in a Circle. It helps her to connect her passion for helping youth to her own development and she is able to share some of her learning experiences with the youth and enhance their learning experience as well.

It helps me when I work with the young people because I share with them the things that I learn here and I'm going to bring them here too just for an outing ...I said I know somebody whose been all over the world and these are young people who've never been out of the neighborhood. They need to see the evidence of having been all over the world so that's going to be a stepping stone for them to know that your life can be that way but you've got to do some things. So, I'm happy to have been here so I can use it as a role model as a place that they can come and see and feel because when you come here you feel something different, you really do and everybody that I've ever brought here has said that.

Another skill important to Danielle is the ability to work in small groups. She has a history in corporate America where she did a lot of teaching and facilitating but it was

in a different context. Oftentimes she worked in a classroom or conference setting where she was the person in the front of the room transferring information to the participants. In a Circle the process of learning and engagement is much different and more intimate. She needs to be able to establish trust and rapport with the group and establish herself as a member of the group. She had to pay more attention to how she would get the group to participate, she thinks more about the environment, ground rules, discussion questions and the learning atmosphere. She has learned how to focus on the people.

It helps me be more focused. When I was in corporate America I did a lot of facilitating and teaching but it was for really large groups. Like sometimes there may be 40 people in a room that I facilitated. This has [the Circle] helped me acquire the skills to do it in a small group because it's way different. It's way different. In a large group, my focus would be on the this whole huge room but in a small group you are so close to each other that you really have to redirect how you focus on people...

*New perspectives.* Several times during the discussion Danielle stressed how much her view of the world had broadened or changed as a result of her participation in the Circles of Hope. Sometimes it results from skilled facilitation where the facilitator challenged her to look at things differently and other times it results from being part of a diverse group where perspectives are different and challenge her view of the world. One such instance was when she learned about how difficult it was for women who have been incarcerated to re-establish themselves in the community.

I know there are women in prison but I always think prison is for men so it changed my whole perspective to see women who are ex offenders and are now back in society and are doing well. It showed me that wow, you can even overcome going to prison and come out and do well. That was



a huge eye opener for me because I never knew anybody who had actually served time in prison—a female. I know a lot of men now, but not a female that had spent time in prison so that changed my way of thinking about women and prison and all of that. Their children and what happened to them...it was just a whole new world for me, whole new world. That's tough and it made me think I could be driving down the street and I could maybe, I could hit somebody and they would die and that's vehicular manslaughter and I could go to prison and it just made me realize how blessed I am, how blessed I am , but for his grace, that could be me.

The Circle actually caused Danielle to rethink her view of the world as it applied to women and incarceration. Intellectually she knew women went to prison but it was not until she actually met someone, engaged in a dialogue with them, and learned about the challenges this woman faced trying to put her life back together when she got out of prison that she understood what it was really like and how society treats people like that. It was a transformative experience for Danielle. She attributes that transformational experience to her participation in a Circle.

I was really happy that I had grown to the point where I did not judge because I would admit, there was a time I would have been, well so what, you did what you did and you had to do your time and all but I didn't see it that way anymore. Really, it comes from being in the Circle and understanding and getting to know people because we may be a culture all our own but inside that culture you've still got all those little mini cultures of people and things and society and so I've been exposed to a lot of them through the Circles.

This is also transformative because not only has Danielle's perspective of women who served time in prison changed but she attributes her transformation to the learning process itself and the exposure to different cultures that she encountered in a Circle. She has learned how to see things more broadly and become more accepting of differences. The ability to see things more broadly have led Danielle in new directions that she would not have gone before. One example was to help a church other than her church set-up a youth program.

I don't know that I would of even done that [affiliated with another church] if I didn't have a wider screen because traditionally you don't belong to one church and then you go over here and work in another church you just don't do that but I stepped out there because I just see a bigger picture, I really see a bigger picture now and so what if it is unorthodox.

The broader picture of the world that she developed came from being part of Circle where she met people from all walks of life and helped her understand that if she felt like she could make a difference in someone's life that the artificial barriers placed in front of her by existing norms could be overcome and she had the support she needed to take that chance.

*Stepping out.* Danielle is engaged in her community in a variety of ways. She is active in her church, she has the youth ministry mentioned above and she is active in her own neighborhood ward politics. Her capacity to work in these contexts has increased because of her affiliation with the Circles of Hope and the support that she receives from the Circle. For example, one of the reasons that she agreed to establish the youth ministry at another church was she saw a need in that community that she felt like she had the ability to address.

I probably would not have done it before but because I've learned in the Circle you've got to go where the need is ...you've got to stop letting

barriers be a reason that you don't do something, so because of that I've stepped out there and went to work at this other church and I was surprised at some of the responses I've got. Some people are like well are you a member? And I said "no". I'm still a member of my church and they say wow, how does that work? I say it works like this. I go over there two Sundays a month and I go to my church two Sundays a month. I run the youth ministry over there. I'm not working with the youth ministry in my church anymore because my church has got 700 members. These people have maybe, maybe 100 on the books and they don't all come. But the need was there.

Even though she knew that some people in her own church were not going to understand what she was doing she decided to take that risk because she knew that the need was there, she had the ability to make a difference, and she had the support of WomanSpirit encouraging her to go forward.

The importance of the support system cannot be overstated. Danielle is tapping into the expertise of the women in her Circle to help her get the youth program going. She would like to get a couple of Circles started as part of her ministry. One focusing on the youth and entrepreneurship and another focusing on the women called a woman's roundtable. While she is stepping out into uncharted waters by volunteering at another church she is using the Circles of Hope process in her ministry and the support system from the Circles she is a part of at WomanSpirit is making it possible for her to take this risk.

In one instance Danielle describe her experience with a vacation bible school. She was facilitating a retreat with a group of young people and they were out of control and not getting much accomplished. She put them into a Circle, turned out the lights, established ground rules and engaged them in a Circle. A couple of the young people

did not like it and left but those who stayed, “we had a wonderful experience because we exchanged and it was easier to exchange in that Circle because there were no tables between us or anything. It just came to me, you know, put them in a Circle.”

Danielle lives in a St. Louis neighborhood where she has become involved in her ward’s politics. Her alderman is committed to making the neighborhood pedestrian oriented and Danielle is supportive of his efforts. Her experiences with the Circles have helped her identify and understand the needs as she sees them in her community.

Learning from the Circles helps [me] to see the need in the community so I can go to my alderman and say, ‘I learned when I was in the Circle that maybe block units would be a good thing’ and he would look into how we could get that started in our community. Just from the things you learn that people need and people want so that if you do it in little bitty pockets in this community and that community, and the community over there eventually we would all have the things that we need in our community.

*Expanding her leadership.* Participating in Circles and being part of WomanSpirit has helped Danielle learn how to be part of a support community. Support is very important to her own personal development and in the service work that she has chosen. She has benefited from the support of the Circle in her own development and in the work that she does with others.

...just to give you an example of what that support has been like, I haven’t had a car since February (it was July) and just getting around is a challenge in this town but I have got a lot of support from the center in helping me get where I need to go and do things ...anything I can do to help somebody else as far as resources go I know a lot of people and my sister knows even more people than I do and I can get a call, do you know somebody that can help this person get this done or...and I can

call somebody to help. It's a give and take we all help each other with what resources we have available.

Danielle is the kind of person that wants to get things done and realizes that if she leverages her resources she can have a broader impact. Her approach to her community work mirrors that understanding. In her work with the youth ministry she effectively engaged the other members of her Circle in support of her efforts in a variety of ways. She had the Imani Family Center host the youth so they could interact and visit with people in their community who have traveled to foreign lands. They are also helping her set up her own Circles through her youth ministry. She is learning how to incorporate the Circles of Hope process into her own community work and is extending her support network in ways that make that possible. Several times Danielle mentioned how important the support has been to her in her own development and in her work and this is reflected in her leadership style.

In some places I'm in the leadership but I can go to a, we call them ward meetings. I won't say anything. I'll just serve the food and clean up after it's over I don't have to say anything. Then some other place I may be the person up front. I've learned that I don't always have to be the person up front....If anybody asks me to do something and I have the time and it's in my power and it makes sense, I'll do it.

Danielle's leadership is taking new and different roads. She has moved from someone who has primarily been involved as a participant in the Circles of Hope process contributing her experiences and insights into someone who is now engaged in a range of community activities that include establishing new Circles under her leadership. She has realized that the support system that she benefits from in her Circles at Imani and in her own personal relationship make it possible for her to exercise her leadership in new ways.

*Case Study Interviews: Part III the Participants*

The participants section includes the stories of three women who have been involved in the Circles of Hope but are not primarily facilitators of the process. They represent themselves; their learning and application of the process a little differently than the facilitators do. The facilitators are out there in the community applying the process. Aeshe views herself as a facilitator and uses the process in her groups like Alley Oops. Debbie applies the process to her work in shaping public policy and Danielle is extending the Circles by stepping out into the community and applying the process in new contexts.

The participants have a somewhat different role to the Circle. They are able to facilitate the process when necessary but do not aspire to create Circles with others groups other than in their own immediate Circle of friends and family. Their use and application of the Circles of Hope is more focused on their development and how they have extended themselves as agents of change in the community. They do it through a variety of ways such as representing the Circle in the community, bringing back resources, extending networks, developing projects, and sharing their knowledge and experience.

*Obie*

Obie has been engaged with WomanSpirit since before the beginning. "I would say since the beginning, even maybe before the beginning as she [Makeda] talked about it I shared the vision with her so I'd say before the beginning if I am not being too presumptuous". She and Makeda have been friends since she was 19 when they worked together in the Assessors office in the City of St. Louis. Their relationship was cemented when Makeda helped Obie work her way through a depression. "She recognized those symptoms and she reached out to me and gave me the benefit of her

experience with depression and the situation I was in at the time, so that more or less cemented our friendship”.

She was actually living in Texas when Makeda developed the Circles of Hope and started WomanSpirit in 1996. However, she came back to St. Louis 2 to 3 times a year and whenever she was in town she participated in programs with WomanSpirit. She moved back to St. Louis permanently in 2000 and has been engaged in the Circles of Hope and WomanSpirit regularly as a participant and a volunteer since that time.

Several themes emerge from discussions with Obie about her relationship to the Circles of Hope process. She believes very strongly that people must be engaged and willing to lend their voices to whatever issue they are concerned about. The process facilitates this type of engagement and provides a safe place for people to develop their voice and leadership capacity.

Another theme is “showing up” and “representing” which focuses on the development of a commitment to whatever it is you choose to do. Just showing up with a willingness to participate can make a big statement to others that you are a good potential partner for collaboration because you at least show enough interest to participate and represent others from your group.

Focus is an important theme for Obie for several reasons. First she has trouble staying focused herself. She has had a surgery that sometimes makes it difficult for her to stay on task. Second she believes that it is important for the group to focus on what is important. Third, it is an important aspect of developing one’s leadership capacity.

Making Connections and building linkages is about how Obie uses the process to connect the different parts of her life together. She has been able to connect her family, her work at WomanSpirit and many of her outside interests and passions to one another through her work at WomanSpirit and the use of the Circles of Hope. Serving as a broker of resources is tied to Obie’s insatiable curiosity. She loves to know what is going

on and is a natural joiner. When she is out representing WomanSpirit she is often officially there to learn what she can learn that might be of use to others in the Circle. She often goes beyond representing and searches out new potential resources and relationships. It is a role that she enjoys playing on behalf of WomanSpirit and the Circles.

New opportunities is the final theme and represents the value that Obie places on new experiences such as meeting new people, going to interesting places, and experiencing things that she never imagined would happen to her.

*Giving voice and becoming engaged.* Voice and engagement are intertwined for Obie. It is important to be heard and the Circles of Hope provide a forum where participants are heard and have a chance to develop their voices. The Circle also provides a forum that helps people better understand other perspectives that are represented in the Circle. One person's voice is reinforced by similar perspectives from others in the group and it empowers them to venture out and become more broadly engaged in community issues. This is the case for Obie. She believes that people must be engaged in order to address issues in the community and she has been empowered to become engaged locally but also regionally and internationally.

Participating in the Circles has solidified for me the fact that you must be engaged if you're going to address the problems or the things that would help or benefit the community. When I talk community I have to talk local first because this is where I am physically situated but at the same time I leave the local community and I go out to other states or other countries so that what you're doing is not just about where you find yourself but it, it can and it does reverberate from community to community and all communities can benefit from individuals participating and me in particular.



Obie believes that everyone has the capacity to be engaged in some way. People need to be involved on some level and everyone has a gift to share. The Circles help people identify and develop those gifts but everyone has a responsibility to share their gifts with the community.

It [being engaged] means that you're involved, that you're...that you can be seen, that you participate in the community in whatever way is comfortable or best for you. Everyone has their gift and you have know what your gift is in order to share your gift so an identification of your gift whatever it may be that's how you get involved with the community, whatever it is...

Obie has several gifts that she shares when she works in her communities. One of them is her passion for participation. She has the perspective that almost all participation can have a positive effect. Sometimes it is important to be engaged in a measured and calculated way as part of a group working to meet a specific objective. Other times it is simply to let people know that you have a different opinion that needs to be heard

It's important that you be heard and that what you have to say is taken into consideration when the final decision is made regarding the matter. From that standpoint it's [being part of a Circle] been helpful...to make a contribution that hopefully is a positive contribution although sometimes you need get in there and just raise hell and I've been known to do that and that in and of itself causes some other things to happen which are good for the most part.

The Circles of Hope enhances her capacity to become engaged because in the Circles they are able to develop leadership skills and a support system that makes it

possible for her and others to face their trials and then step out and take chances as they go about making a difference in their communities.

...women who have not had the opportunity to be a leader they get to learn leadership skills and I like that. I think that it's helpful in a person's life if they know how to lead...and the comraderie, the support if you're having a problem or going through a trial as I sometimes refer to things like that. Someone has been where you are, struggling through, and they can share with you the other side of that and that's helpful, nothing like it.

*Showing up and representing.* Showing up is one of the most important values to Obie. She believes it is critical to developing relationships and enhancing her standing in the community. When asked by the son of a friend what she thought was the number one thing he could do to be successful. She replied:

If you show up that says a lot of things ok. Number 1, you're here, so if you're here your interested, you were motivated because you got yourself here and I've got your ear for that particular period of time so just showing up. So we show up a lot over here.

"Representing" is showing up and representing the Circle or the organization. Representing is also about the support of having a group behind her. It is important to Obie that she does not feel like she is out there by herself. When she represents she knows that the Circles is behind her, encouraging her to participate on their behalf. It provides her security and credibility because that she is not alone doing this just for herself as she engages with other groups and organizations. She is there representing WomanSpirit and her Circles. Representing shows the commitment of the organization to working with others in the community.

It allows me to have...the force and the strength of an organization with me or supporting me as I go out, or go about what I am doing. Where are

you from, Imani Family Center, ok, out in the community now some folks say, Ah, well you know Imani represents; meaning we show up and that's important.

Participants in the Circles are encouraged to represent themselves and the organization at forums and events around the community as a way of linking the Circles to resources, monitoring issues as they develop in other parts of the community and learning about other groups and organizations that they may collaborate with on projects in the future. One of the places where Obie has been representing is the American Heart Association. She has been a member of the American Heart Association Minority Council since 2000. She represents WomanSpirit and the Imani Family Center but she is also nurturing a passion for healthcare that she has had most of her life. She spent many years in the military as a nurse and only stopped nursing because of her own health issues. Earlier in her life before her involvement with WomanSpirit she had been a volunteer with the American Heart Association as a CPR instructor. Her work representing the organization allowed her to rekindle her affiliation with that organization.

When I did come to work here in January of 2000 Makeda indicated that she had started out working with the American Heart Association and that one of our friends was chairing the minority council and asked Makeda if she would come and participate so this is one that she did. I think that something like 99 or 98 she had been pulled away to other activities so when I came in January of 2000 Makeda said you might want to pick this up again I don't know how you feel about it but you might want to go and see what you can do over there.

Her work representing the Circles at the Imani Family Center has helped her access resources through the American Heart Association network on behalf of the others in their Circles and improved their overall understanding of Heart disease and she

has involved others in her Circles in American Heart Association events and activities. The American Heart Association has benefited from her representing as well. In 2005 she was the recipient of their volunteer award.

*Focus.* Focus came up in this interview as it relates to the process and how it helps her stay on track and focused on the tasks she is trying to accomplish.

The strength of the process is that, for me, it provides a real focus, you don't wander off over here and there but you are focused on this particular question because I am easily distracted at this particular point ...Yeah (laughing), it's easier to stay focused and on task with the process. So that's helpful for me a big help for me.

Obie had a brain aneurism in February of 2000 and she occasionally has trouble staying on task and can be easily distracted. The process is good for her because it helps her stay focused. It is important to her in terms being able to get things done and getting through the trials that life presents her. The key elements of the process that she finds helpful are the questions. They are direct, simple, and make it possible to address difficult issues and stay on task.

I guess the direct questions. The direct questions are good for me. They, once again, get that focus through the direct questions. The follow-up questions if there's something that's not clear. The follow-up to clear up a point or make it crystal clear and the support that comes from the Circle and the process.

It is also important to her to focus on the good things in a situation and use the strength gained from that to get through difficulty and keep a positive outlook on things. She told a story about an encounter with her niece who was trying to close the glove box in the car as they were traveling. The box did not close and bounced open and as it open her niece scrambled to keep things from spilling all over the car. She was

successful in keeping the glove box from spilling out onto the floor but hurt her finger in the process.

Focus on what's clear. You know what's bad because your finger's hurting. So you don't have to say 'oh my finger hurts' just say 'oh I kept everything alright, I kept everything from falling on the floor and hitting the ground so that's a, that's one that I use a lot is directing to focus on the positive in a situation and on the best, the best that I can give.

*Making connections and building linkages.* Obie looks to bridge together many aspects of her life and Circles of Hope process assists with that in a number of ways. First, they provide a forum where she is able to share her experiences and connect those experiences to issues, people and projects she is working on today. Second, she is able to connect and use her personal experiences to make a contribution to the Circle. Third, she connects with other members of the family through some of the events and activities of the Circles. Finally, she is able to connect things that she has been able to do as adult that never even crossed her mind in youth.

Obie is a connector, someone who puts things together. She is able to tap into her own history and see what is happening today as an extension of that history. Her work with the American Heart Association is an example of that where she connected what she was doing with them today representing the Imani Family Center to her volunteer work with them nearly 20 years ago. When she first went to represent Imani at her first meeting she met the chair of the Minority Council who turned out to be a good friend who had been supportive to her when she suffered her brain aneurism. It served as reinforcement to her that she was in the right place.

We went in [to the Minority Council meeting] and the person who originally started the council, who was the chair, was there too. So when he saw me come in he said, oh, it's so good to see you. He also had

been at the hospital the night I had my surgery so he is like a real family friend. He was one of the folks that came in as family and friend at the surgery. He was glad to see me and everything.

These types of connections are important to her work and working with the Circles provided opportunities for her to make many of those types of connections. Another example is a project that she developed out of a Circle called the House of David which would provide transitional housing for 8 to 11 homeless veterans with disabilities. They felt like they had the capacity to help these men transition to unassisted living. They believed their skills and resources were such that they could be successful in this type of project and provide an appropriate use for one of their buildings which at the time was underutilized.

Obie was very excited about the potential of the House of David project because she was a veteran herself and she saw opportunities to work with veteran organizations that she had a history with to build the types of collaborations WomanSpirit would need to make the project work. It would also allow Obie to connect back to that part of her past in a meaningful way. She felt it was her responsibility to connect with the veterans organizations on behalf of the project because she was a veteran and they would listen to her.

Early in the project she had arranged for the leaders of a committee from the America Legion who dealt with homeless veterans to visit the Imani Family Center, look at the building and talk about how they might collaborate. They in turn invited Obie to speak at one of their meetings. She took great pride in being able to go to that meeting and address the group. It was a way of "representing" her Circle but it was also a way of connecting that part of her life to her current life's work. In talking about that presentation she noted that she expected them to be supportive and they were. She

also connected her work with them today to her early experiences. Her work today is an extension of that work in the past.

I made a brief introduction of myself and told them why I was there and did need their support. They made the decision to count on us. That's the good thing. The Veterans organizations they are about taking care of the veterans and that's important—being one and maybe one day having a real need for them to come to my aid. I would certainly expect them too and they do, they do. It's something that started in 1974 and in 2005 I am still involved with it.

When Obie participates in a Circle she looks for ways that she can use her own experiences to contribute to the dialogue and help others better understand her as well as connect to her experiences in ways that benefit them. She used the example of the passing of her sister to illustrate how being part of the Circle was helpful to her because she was able to share something important to her and help someone else. Obie lost her sister after a protracted illness. Later that year in a Circle the facilitator asked the group what they each thought their biggest blessing was for that year and Obie said, "that God had allowed me to be at my sister's side when she took her last breathe." Many in the group and one woman in particular were surprised by her response because they knew that it had been a very difficult time for her so she explained it:

I could have been anywhere, I could have been out of town, just gone and who knows when I would have been able to come back. I would not have wanted to walk in on that. So it was real, my biggest blessing for that year was that it happened like it did. In saying that to her [the woman who doubted her] she thought back on when her mother passed and she...she received some clarity and some understanding about death.

A third type of connection is to bring her niece into the Circles when there are opportunities to have experiences that would not otherwise be available to her. One of the issues of concern to Obie and others involved with the Circles of Hope is that the young people, especially the girls in their community, are growing up isolated. They try to counteract that with programs and projects that the young people will like and will open them up to new experiences as well as opportunities for service.

I've got a niece who turned 13 this year and through the Imani Family Center I have been able to bring her over and have her have some experiences that she would not have otherwise. She gets a big kick out of working with the Young Neighbors in Action, big kick out of that, she really wants to come and when they are here.

Young Neighbors in Action is a faith-based group of teenagers who visit the Imani Family Center for a week every summer to do volunteer projects and participate in dialogue with some of the women at the center. Over the years a number of the local youth will also come to Imani at the same time to meet the kids from Young Neighbor in Action and to participate in the volunteer activities.

There are a number things Obie has been able to do that simply would not have happened had she not become involved with the Circles of Hope. Some of these are things that she never would have conceived of as a young person growing up yet she is still able to connect them to her own history. One that was really important to her related to experience with the United Nations.

In high school I was, well I was a member of the human relations club and one of the main projects that the human relations club did was to conduct a UN [United Nations] session and I participated in that for several years in high school and I guess I never really thought about me personally going to the UN but as a result of my association with WomanSpirit and



the Imani Family Center I've been to the UN. I have walked the halls of the UN. I have met people who work there who are affiliated with it and it's a good thing for me. Just like I said I enjoy people and relating to people from all over the world is just wonderful for me but I never thought that I would be there (she laughs).

Another example relates to her experiences with the Catholic Church. Obie grew up Baptist but her best friend while she was growing up was Catholic. Obie liked going to church with her because the service was only an hour long. She tried to talk her mother into letting her go to the Catholic Church and because she was studying Latin in school and the Catholic Church was the only place where Latin was spoken she was able to convince her mother to let her go with her friend once a month. WomanSpirit purchased their building, the Imani Family Center from the Ursuline Sisters and one of the Nuns has been a good partner over the years. Obie and a couple of the others in the Circle were made lay associated of the Catholic Ursuline Order, which Obie sees almost as a coming home.

Being here has put me back in the congregation of the Catholic society with the Sister Marie and Makeda partnership. I am now a lay associate of the Catholic of the Ursuline Order, so that, I don't think that would have been possible with me...with me not being here, I don't think I would have had that as an option...

*Brokering resources.* This last theme really builds on the others but looks at a role that Obie is able to play on behalf of the group that suits her gifts very well. She loves people and is a good communicator as well as a broker of resources and information. This relates to her learning and the value she places on learning as well as it allows her to play a role that she is very good at on behalf of others in the Circle.

Obie likes to be helpful and one of her gifts is her willingness to share information that she collects or has available with others. It is a strong value for her and it is a way that feels she is able to contribute.

I have information and sharing it with other members of the group is a way of sharing a gift. I have information and I'm sharing and I'm really trying to put it out to my scope as far as I can put it out and then as I put it out I ask them to share it with your church or whoever you come in contact with. That's pretty much my way.

She is able to play this role partly because of her ability to make connections and represent the group so she finds herself in many situations where she is able to gather information and resources. Obie is also very curious and her curiosity often means she will stumble onto resources that others can use.

When there's a forum or a meeting, I will go...I have an insatiable curiosity about what the people are doing so I'll go to a lot of different stuff just to see what's going on...The Franciscan sisters dedicated a peace pole over at St. Louis University one morning and I went and I attended that and as I was attending that I also noticed activity going into a building. 'Well let me see what's going on in here'. So I went in and it was a health fair and I went on and collected a few goodies and got some information.

Her role as information broker also mirrors her philosophy about decision making. She believes it is very difficult to make good decisions if you do not have all the information you need to make a good decision so she may take it upon herself to gather what she believes is good information.

Obie believes the learning element in a Circle is important to the process and the experiential learning where each person shares their experiences with a given issue.

This type of learning suits her well because she values experience and it provides a forum where she is able to share the information and resources she has collected.

A method of learning and... more by a sharing of experience... If you've been through the fire and you can tell me, I don't have to go. You save me some trouble or you provide some insight I maybe didn't have it before. So those are the kinds of things that I get from the Circle and sometimes it's just a matter of what's said and how it's said that makes it clear or touches your heart.

*Gene*

Gene has worked most of her adult life (39 years) for the City of St. Louis. She has been involved with WomanSpirit since the very beginning. Gene describes a conversation before the program started where she and her friend, Makeda, the founder of WomanSpirit, had discussed what eventually became WomanSpirit and the Circles of Hope process.

Well, she came to talk to me about it at the foot of my bed and we talked about getting started and the whole process—that she wanted to help the community and help women get to a place where they could control their own lives because there are so many women that are out of control.

Like a number of the others she got involved because she wanted to support her friend in her work and make a difference in the community particularly for other women.

Gene has a very personal perspective on the Circles of Hope shaped partly by her view of what her role is in a Circle. She has always seen herself as primarily a participant and not as a facilitator of the process. She has been involved for more than 10 years and has the training and capacity to serve as a facilitator but views her role in the process as someone who can contribute through her participation in the group by listening, sharing her experiences, and offering support whenever possible. When she

first got involved she was hoping to socialize and become more involved in the community.

I was hoping to change because I wasn't doing a lot of things in the community. I was just staying at home. I wasn't doing a lot of socializing or anything like that so it gave me something to do, once a month, twice, a week, or whenever we had some type of gathering, or just the coming together with other people. I was very open to change.

Her perspectives on the Circles of Hope are also shaped by two challenges in her life where the learning and support she received in the Circles were very important to her. The first was the loss of a job. Gene had worked for more than 30 years for the City of St. Louis in their real estate division, and felt like she had done everything she needed to advance in her field. She had cultivated her experience and supplemented that experience with continuing education. A promotion that she felt she had earned was given to someone else with very little experience and no education. She filed a grievance and as a result was fired. For 18 months she was out of work while her lawyers filed a wrongful dismissal suit. She won the suit and was reinstated in her position but the process was very difficult. During that time she spent a lot of time volunteering and participating in programs at the Imani Family Center.

When I got fired in 1999 and I worked over here and amazingly I never was depressed. I didn't know where my next money was coming from but I never missed a car note and I never missed a house note so, I got along just well...The Circles really helped me because I came over here and I kind of lost myself in doing the work around here every day and I never really dwelt on losing my job I left that up to my attorney where I would have been depressed and down. I got a little stipend. It wasn't much but it kept the little nickels and dimes in my pocket. I could go and have

lunch every now and then, you know, so that really, really, helped me, where if they hadn't been here I don't know what I would have done. I really don't. Because there's nowhere out there that really helps you.

The second challenge occurred when she was diagnosed with cancer a little over two years ago. She has been battling the cancer, enduring surgeries, chemotherapy and the illnesses and stresses that go along with that disease. WomanSpirit, the Circles, and the people she has met provide her with critical energy and support as she continues her struggle against the cancer.

Several key themes emerged from the conversations with Gene shape her perspective of the Circles of Hope process. The first is the opportunity to build relationships through engagement. A number of times she talked about how small her world would be without the Circles of Hope. It has literally opened her up to a world of possibilities and introduced to more people and perspectives than she had access to in her social and family life prior to becoming engaged in the Circles of Hope process. She has had the opportunity to work with others, meet people from all over the world, and develop the capacity to move beyond meeting her own needs to the point where she is able to develop an understanding and concern for the needs of others, experiencing a change in how she viewed the world.

A third theme is the opportunity to help others through the sharing of her personal experiences and stories. Gene places a strong value on experience and thus learns from others' experiences and wants to share her experiences with others in hopes that they may benefit from what she's lived through and accomplished.

Energy is also important theme that arose from her battle with cancer. As a cancer survivor Gene is tuned in to those things that give her energy and the place and the process are important sources of support and energy for Gene. She also relates energy and spirituality with the place and the process.

A fourth theme is the importance of listening and not criticizing others. Gene is sensitive to how the group responds to her sharing and values the fact that she will not be criticized for sharing her perspectives. She feels safe to participate because she knows her opinions will be respected and she has learned to be more open to other's perspectives becoming less critical of different points of view.

Gene articulates a concern for safety and security. Safe in terms of how she participates in the community as well as secure in that she will have what she needs when she retires in the near future. The process plays an important role in addressing both of these. Focus is something Gene notes is an outcome of the Circles of Hope process. She talks about it as something she has experienced and witnessed in others. Finally, the process has encouraged her to speak out in her community. Using her voice to address the issues she sees in her community.

*Engaging with others, building relationships and a changing worldview.*

Participation in the Circles of Hope has been a way for Gene to engage with a wide variety of people in dialogues about the issues they share in common in an environment where sharing is expected and differences are respected. Engaging with others in the Circles of Hope has led to the development of relationships with a wide variety of people with perspectives different from hers. For her the process of engagement has actually changed her perspective on a number of things including how she thinks about people, values diversity, relates to peers and participates in the community.

She enjoys the social element of the process—meeting new people being opened up to new ideas and building relationships with people outside her normal Circle of friends. Even though there is a diversity of ideas, values and perspectives she feels she is still able to form strong bonds with people that come from many different places.

The people [who come to visit Imani] are a group of people from a lot of diverse situations. I have met people from everywhere here—all over the

world [laughing], and it's been a heck of an experience to know what other people do and how other people think. It is camaraderie, a closeness [I feel]. Nobody is ever putting anybody down or anything like that.

This was not always her perspective. In a number of ways the process of engagement in the Circles of Hope process facilitated a change in how she perceived many things in the world. These changes have affected her personally and her relationship to the community. "I had not even thought that I needed to change or was subject to change. I was kind of straight forward. I did it my way and that was the only way to do it. But, I see there's other ways of doing things now."

Changes in how she viewed things came directly from her engagement in the Circles of Hope. In this passage she describes how participation in the Circles of Hope helped her to get a broader sense of what she was going through when she lost her job.

...by listening to other people and how they perceive their lives and how they've gotten out of different predicaments, that they've figured out some way to circumvent the problem, I think that's how I realized, 'I wasn't the only one out of a job'. I hadn't been out of one in my life but so what. I wasn't the first. I must have thought I was going to be the only one or something. I got through it.

This change in perspective helped her realize she was not unique in her experience and it opened her up to a range of different possibilities in terms of being able to accept assistance and support from others with similar experiences.

In another passage she describes the Circles of Hope as a learning process that helped her understand that engagement makes it possible for her to learn from the experiences of others.

It's a learning process because you really don't understand other people if you don't stop and listen and you learn that the way that you always thought is not the way it always has been. People have experienced a lot of things that you have not experienced... listening to other people's experience has really helped me because those are experiences that didn't ever cross my mind. I have always had a job, I went to college but I didn't finish but I have always had a good job....and when someone says, 'well I've got 4 kids and I can't feed them', I couldn't relate to that. Where now, I can relate to it, they needed a lot of help where I've always had it.

She expressed how the process has shown her that other viewpoints are valuable and can be non-threatening. This type of learning is important to her because she now feels that she views herself and others differently because of her experiences in the Circles of Hope.

Being an active member of WomanSpirit has taught her things about herself that have made it possible for her to be a better resource to others. It is through her self reflection that she expresses how she has changed and how that has changed how she relates to others and has had the effect of making her more optimistic.

I'm not as harsh on myself and I am not as harsh on other people now. I realize people have their own ideas and they have their way of doing things. I used to figure if I didn't do it the right way it wasn't supposed to be done at all. Well, I tried the right way and if it don't work I try something else (laughing). Yeah, there's got to be a way (laughing)! One way or the other it'll work.

Her change in worldview due to increased engagement has also translated into different ways of acting. She stated early in the interview that she wanted to get more involved in the community and participating in the Circle was a way to do that.



It [The Circles of Hope process] makes me think about the community more. Where if you aren't in a Circle you don't really think about things that's going on in the world other than watching TV and ...you don't know if it really impacts your life and how it impacts your life. The Circle has let me know how different aspects of government impacts my life and how it's not just the US government. It's the local government and that we've got to start at the local government to make change.

She has translated this learning into actual change in her behavior in the community and to the point where she feels like she can contribute her own skills and perspectives.

A lot of people don't realize that just getting involved in your ward where you live to work on change is so helpful. Sometimes you're blocked by the powers to be which I found in my ex-alderman. I had written letters and tried to talk to her about conservation in our area which she did not understand and by me being down there I understood that south St Louis was trying to force conservation here in north St Louis because blacks could not afford to have the housing done back like it was [referring to a proposal to force landowners to restore properties or face possible sanctions]. They may be able to repair it but they could not put it back like it was and she ignored me. So we got rid of her. I have never been political because I have always been civil service downtown... so I never got into that political mess because it was just a mess.

What Gene has learned from the Circles of Hope through her engagement in the process has not only affected her ability to speak out and get involved in addressing issues that affect her directly but it has encouraged her to speak out on issues that are important to her as a person. Making her community a conservation district could actually have benefited her personally as she has a good job and steady income.

Improvements in the properties in her neighborhood could have a positive impact on property values but she saw what it meant for some of her neighbors who did not have the same access to resources and she spoke out.

*Helping through sharing.* Another thing she finds attractive about the Circles of Hope process is that it offers help to people but it is not prescriptive. She has gained a lot through the sharing that occurs in the Circles, and it is through this same engagement that she sees a role for herself in helping others. Several times during the interview Gene would articulate a concern for those who need help but also communicated a sense that they need to be able to figure things out for themselves and the Circles help people do that.

They [program participants] may know what they want to do but don't know how to go about doing it. The process here is not to tell you what to do but to give you some ideas of how to go about what you are trying to accomplish...it's not a place where somebody is telling you what to do all the time. You can think it out for yourself but you'll have different options to go by. Somebody else's experiences and how they got through a certain situation.

It is important to Gene that she is able to figure things out for herself but may also be in a position to offer something to someone else in the Circle based on her own experiences and views of the world. Participation in a Circle is a way for Gene to contribute to the development of others often unexpectedly.

... sometimes you don't know you, know, but if somebody triggers something, I know do this, do this, do this, but sometimes if you have not...the Circle makes you pull things out of you that you really don't know you've got (laughing), Yeah, it does.

She also sees the Circles as a means of getting focused, planning and organizing. She describes it as a way of getting yourself on track so that you can develop. In the following passage she attempts to describe the process for someone who knows nothing about the Circles of Hope process.

If you have a problem and you don't know what to do with it we would probably have some Circles over here that would help you with employment, getting going to school, getting focused on what your goals really are and how to reach those goals. That's some of the Circles that have helped over here because some people were not focused. They didn't have a plan. You do have to have a plan and to get a plan we have had Circles to try and get your mind in state to understand where you need to go.

For some people who participate regularly in a Circle they become part of a system and a community network. They learn how to share and build their own networks but also contribute to the development of the community connections of others. This sometimes leads to mentoring types of relationships. Sometimes this happens by design and other times it happens because of the way the process works. People learn about each other, their skills and talents. As people need help they learn who in the group might have skills or know of someone who has skills that can help them. The Circle becomes an extended network that connects people to resources. Gene's extensive networks with the City of St. Louis have been valuable to many of the Circles that she has been a part of and she has developed the skills to share those resources with others. In this next passage talks about how it works for her.

...helping people, listening to what they need and giving them that type of help. If it's nothing but a phone call or phone number, somebody to call that I know. For instance today, my girlfriend that I do appraisals with, her

son had bought a car from someone and somehow he got a salvage title. They pulled the car over, and he wrote the number down and he wrote it as a 2 and it looked like a 3 so the policeman told him you'll never get this car back and the detective has really been very nasty. When she told me about it I said, 'he said you'll never get this car back?' I said 'call Colonel Hawkins, I think he'll get the car back. I gave her the phone number. He called her back this morning since I've been gone. He said, 'I'll get in touch with the detectives'. So, you don't know who you know and sometimes it's a word that helps people and not nothing that you did, a big thing, but just a word.

This passage illustrates not only how she is able to share what she knows but it also illustrates how she is able to help facilitate the other woman's learning. Gene did not call the Colonel for her colleague. Instead Gene gave the woman the Colonel's number so she could call him herself. This has the effect of expanding that woman's own network and circle of relationships. Now she too has access to the Colonel because of her relationship to Gene.

*Energy and support systems.* The Imani Family Center where many of the Circles are conducted is an important element of the process for Gene. It is an important source of energy. At the time of the interview she was recovering from Cancer treatments and had difficulty finding energy so she was very sensitive to the things that give her energy.

It's the life, surroundings, always happy, it's never negative, you can feel down and come here and feel up when you leave. There's something to be said, something to be done and it makes you feel good to be here. She believes this is partly due to the spirituality of the place.

A spirit, it's probably hard to explain but God's always in the plan and it kind of generates around here. You just feel light hearted when you come here—it's not heavy. You can leave the cares of the world outside.

Gene believes the place exudes energy. A couple of times during the interview she mentioned that she feels better, stronger, when she is at the Imani Family Center. "Oh yes, it's a lot of energy. This place gives you energy. I didn't feel that good when I came over here today. I feel a lot better. I was real tired because I get so tired."

It is hard for Gene to separate the Imani Family Center from the Circles of Hope process. Clearly she feels safe and comfortable at the Center making it possible for her to more fully participate in the Circles. The place and the process work together to create a safe environment for Gene's personal development and in the following passage she expresses that relationship.

I feel that it lets me express my inner being. I can say whatever I want to in that Circle and I will not be criticized or ridiculed and maybe something out of that Circle, something I hear, somebody will say do something that will make me say 'oh, I can figure that out now', and spiritually it has helped me because I think about all the things that could go wrong, that can go wrong, and has gone wrong, but I have been able to come up out of it.

*Listening and not criticizing.* Listening is another key element of the Circles of Hope process that Gene values. Listening makes it possible for her to understand others and for others to understand her. Closely related to listening is suspending judgment or not criticizing others for what they say or think. This makes it possible for her to trust the process enough to share her stories and to listen to the stories of others.

Main ingredients are listening, hearing what other people are saying, not putting anybody down, feeling free to say whatever you want to say and

nobody looks on you as less than or more than, whatever... It's helpful because you're more relaxed. You don't feel like somebody is going to do something to you for saying the wrong thing or feeling the wrong thing. Whatever you feel you feel. I think that's one of the most helpful things in the Circles.

Listening has made her a better resource to others in the Circle but it has also helped her better understand when she can help and when she cannot.

Yeah, I listen better now (laughing). I listen better to other people's problems. I don't take them on myself, Even though a lady's trying her darndest to put one on me. She's an invalid and she wants to have a house built but she's got nickels and it costs dollars. It don't work. I am going to talk to her tomorrow and try to convince her that her dream may be a possible dream but not at this time. I try to help anybody that I can, especially in the field that I'm in, real estate.

She wants to participate, contribute what she can but she is careful not to take on someone else's issues as her own.

Gene attributes the development of her listening skills to the leadership of the organization. It was modeled for her in the process and she has learned how to use that skill in negotiating her own relationships and challenging herself to step out of her comfort zone and get more fully engaged in her own development and the development of others.

...Makeda, has an air about her, about listening, and thinking critically about what someone is asking or needs help with and I have tried to never duplicate but have tried to listen to other people that come to me for help and try to steer them the right way and I think I wouldn't have really cared one way or the other because I have never been helpful outside of

my little Circles, my own personal friends and family. I never ventured too much outside that Circle but being over here all groups of people come over here, a phenomenal amount of people (laughing).

The Circles of Hope process has helped her to open up—broaden her personal circle of friends because of the diversity of experiences she has had the opportunity to be a part of and she now values that kind of interaction.

Yeah, yeah, so that [the circle] gave me the ability to think of other people other than myself and working with different groups and...it's just been a heck of an experience that you can't pay for. Can't buy it umm, umm...and I've met some wonderful people that I would never have met.

It has helped her learn to participate more fully and to be part of a community. Participation in a Circle is more than a support group learning experience but it is a community building experience. She is part of a group of women that regularly greets people from other cultures, classes, and countries and Gene values this aspect of the process.

*Financial Security.* Gene is at a point in her life where financial security is important to her. Self reliance is also an important related value for Gene. She clearly places a lot of value on being able to meet her financial obligations now and have financial security in her retirement. She has stayed in her job so long in part because she expects to be rewarded with a financial package that will take care of her in her retirement. One of the Circles Gene appreciated the most was a Circle that dealt with issues of financial security. In this passage you can see how she was able to connect the process to the learning to changes she wanted to make for herself. It is one of the reasons that she has stayed in a position professionally that has not been very good for her personally:

When you are getting older, you try to figure out your money and you're trying to figure out what's the best way to do and have as much of it as you can (laughing) to make it because social security is not always going to be here. So, I have been trying to see what the best [thing is] to do [with] my finances and get some articles that we have had on getting help on your financing and getting someone to oversee them and just figuring out what you're going to do. I am going to be sitting pretty good because I have social security and my retirement and other monies that have been set aside but some people don't have that and they really have to figure that out because you figure money goes a long ways but it don't go that far. I am very blest, my house is paid for so I don't have to look for no bricks. But keeping up the gas, electric, and telephone bill can be a hassle and we learned how to budget. We have done Circles on budgeting your money and see where you're spending too much, which I never learned that part...I haven't learned that part...(laughing). I was aware of it but...I jumped up and went and bought me a new car. I said I was wasting too much money I had to see some of it.

*Speaking out and using her voice.* One of the outcomes of Gene's participation in the Circles of Hope process is her increased participation in her community. She has become an activist on some issues and is using her own voice to articulate her concerns publicly.

I am more active now, I will speak out, I'll go to meetings, I'll go to community meetings, where I didn't care one way or the other but I know it's a direct impact on what goes on around me. I know if you open your mouth you might be wrong but somebody might be listening.



This illustrates her commitment to participation, her voice, and I think it illustrates that her voice has developed to the point where she is comfortable speaking out on a range of issues. She has become engaged in local ward politics and in the following passage she discusses how she participates.

I am doing the ward right now. I will go to the ward meetings and see what they are talking about what is going on in the ward itself because there's a lot of redevelopment going on and I have even tried to talk to one of the developers that did some housing that me as an appraiser I wouldn't have sold and I'll tell you why. The washer and dryer were in the master bedroom and I thought that was absolutely ridiculous. Somebody should sell an unsuspecting person that type of building. That they will never be able to turn and it would have been better for them to have put it in the basement. I just...and the builder never did call me back. Those types of things, housing, I'm deep into housing. That's kind of my field. I see what's going on in the community, really, trying to get people to stop jumping up running out to the county buying that junk. Take what you've got here and fix it. Because you can do it right here.

She is also not reluctant to use her influence and has very strong opinions that she's not afraid to use to challenge what she sees as unnecessary oversight. In the next passage she is describing a confrontation she recently had with city officials from the Community Development Agency. She was trying to help a friend acquire property in the city to build a house. It was a vacant lot that the City did not want to sell. Eventually they did sell her the building but then they wanted her to develop the lot differently than she had planned on developing it. This illustrates how she has taken the voice she developed as part of a Circle and used it to expand her participation in the community building on her experience in real estate development.

She [representative from the community development agency] wanted me to turn the house sideways so the garage could go on the back. I told her I didn't think so. I didn't want to look at that man's house next door. Are you crazy? So they [community development agency staff] don't get up off their butts and go out into the field and look, they make decisions sitting behind a desk. Now that's one change I would really, really, like to be in on. Because that's all they do, they sit behind a desk and make decisions that they have no idea about. But I have made my little noises.

She obviously has some strong opinions that she shares regarding the work of the Community Development Agency but when she says she has made her "little noises" she is implying that she has learned how to get herself heard by the folks in that agency. It is no small accomplishment when working with a city bureaucracy. Gene believes that what goes on in the Circle has directly impacted her ability to understand what is happening in her community and has given her the knowledge she needs to be a more effective participant.

...because we talk about what's going on in the world here and the economy and what affects change and what affects the ability to get things changed and I think the Circle has had some input into me stepping up which I usually wouldn't have stepped up.

She got involved in community affairs because was able to recognize the disparity that she saw in her neighborhood and she started to speak up about it. "Yes, I saw the disparity in my neighborhood where all the police wanted to do was come in and jack the little children up instead of protecting people..." She has become a force for change in her own neighborhood as a result and is a keen observer of the local condition and when she feels like she has something to contribute she steps up.

The alderman kept on putting off some little old ladies...each ward has 'x' amount of dollars that they can use to fix up the housing and the alderman kept telling them, 'I'll have to get back to you, I'll have to get back to you' I went through the process myself and I knew it took a year. Older people are very skeptical and I asked her, I said, why do you keep telling these people you'll get back to them?' Hand out the information and give it to them. Let them process it if they want to use it. She didn't hoping they'll go away.

She used her experience to engage with local leadership on behalf of others in her neighborhood. Not because they need representing but because she believed she understood the issue and was willing to speak to it and become involved.

### *Elizabeth*

Elizabeth is a retired autoworker with boundless energy who first met Makeda while working for Ford Motor Company as a painter. Makeda was working for Ford as a trainer and was conducting a seminar that Elizabeth was attending.

She [Makeda] was doing an eight week training seminar and she waited for me one week after class and we became friends, she asked me how she could help me. She could see in me that I was disturbed. I thought I was going pretty good but I was a little disgusted and she saw beyond that, she was looking deeper than the exterior of the person and that's one thing that drew me to Makeda.

When Elizabeth heard about the program Makeda had developed and was starting she decided to get involved. She had never participated in an organization before joining WomanSpirit. That quickly changed as she has been a participant and volunteer since very early in the development of WomanSpirit and is currently President of the Board of Directors.

Well, when I heard about the program...it was something new, something I had never seen...but I had never been a part of any group thing and at that time you had to know somebody to get in [other organizations] so if you didn't know nobody you weren't getting in but Makeda was open and said ok. You didn't have to fill out an application, if you wasn't doing your best you wouldn't be there. She's not going to settle for anything but the best.

Elizabeth has a broad perspective on the Circles of Hope process that is encapsulated in six themes. Finding commonality is about how the process helps people focus on what people share together and still learning how to appreciate differences. The expectation is that through engagement and by each person contributing their part it is possible to find common ground. Learning as self esteem building includes becoming independent by challenging long held perceptions of identity. Self advocacy and creating changes explores how Elizabeth has began using the Circles of Hope process to advocate on her own behalf and how it has helped her evolve into someone able to advocate on behalf of others and the community. The changes in her life are applied to her work "representing" in the community.

Cross generational sharing explores how she uses the Circles to respect and utilize the wisdom of the elders and build relationships across generations. Learning for development looks at how learning has impacted her work with others, her strong value for education and her experiences using the Circles of Hope to enhance her own learning. Hospitality is the final theme and is something that Elizabeth values personally. She is the self proclaimed Queen of hospitality and strives to make everyone's experience at the Imani family Center a good one.

*Finding commonality.* The Circles of Hope has given Elizabeth the opportunity to meet people from many different walks of life and one of the things that she has

discovered is that there is lots of commonality amongst the women that she has met even though there may also be many differences.

When you come inside [Imani Family Center], you will first notice we are just women that's what we are, grassroots women, but we saw a need for all kinds of women. It wasn't just black women. We all had different colors but we all had the same problems. Just our skin was different and once we started having our Circles and finding out that we all had a commonality if it wasn't nothing but trying to raise our grandkids, if it wasn't nothing but trying to pay a bill, we all had light bill problems...we all had a commonality somewhere. If it wasn't a bill, it was son or a daughter, or a grandson, or a granddaughter, a cousin, a niece, someone was in trouble that we could always relate to. We've lost our loved ones. We've all had a commonality somewhere...

Discovering what she shares with others is an important value for Elizabeth and because she feels that connection to other women she is able to look past differences and forge bonds with other women that minimize the differences and focus on what they share as grassroots women. The Circles are the forum for that sharing. The ground rules, the go-arounds, the time limits are all elements of the process that work in tandem to equalize people and manage how they relate to one another. There is lots of mutual support that results from the process and the commonalities established among the women.

I've seen all the women that came here from Africa, Botswana, the women from the Delta, we all had a commonality to want to be better for our families, for our communities, and for ourselves. Because once you find something to do that makes you feel better, then it's like catching on fire. If I'm happy then I come in and you might be saying it but if I come in

showing it you're gonna be better. So that's what we are, when I'm down so I bring you up and vice versa and that's the Circle, that's the link in the chain to hold onto one another, to, like the bible says, everything's about scripture, but to bear each others' burdens. If I'm feeling bad you're feeling bad. If I'm sick we all sick (laughing), for real it's the truth! It goes like that!

The Circle is the place where differences are explored in a safe and somewhat controlled environment. Elizabeth talked about focusing on what they shared as women and the other things will work themselves out. She credits the process with creating an environment where it is possible to work out differences and turn them into opportunities. Opportunities that can be leveraged by figuring out what people need. Differences are a source of strength for the group as they all bring different skills, perspectives, and vocations to the group that can be used to help the community, "we all had different vocations but we all have one commonality and it's helping the community and helping each other be the best that they can be". She believes each person in the group brings something to the Circle that is uniquely them and it is the diversity of the people and their common interest that define the Circle.

One thing I can say about the Circles, they will encourage you. One thing about Makeda is that she can see, like what Danielle is good at what she can do well, that's what Danielle does. I'm good at what I do so that's what Elizabeth does. Obie's good at what she does with the yard and other things, you know. So everybody has a part in the Circle to make it complete where if everybody were doctors it wouldn't be a Circle.

Elizabeth is a social person that loves being around people. Exploring what people share is one thing she believes is critical to the effectiveness of the Circles of Hope because in her opinion no one person can do things alone. One person might be

able to start something but it takes many to make something worthwhile happen. "I think all of us working together, collaborating, collectively to get something accomplished that we all consider we're a part of. Because that's what we want here".

*Learning as self esteem building.* Elizabeth was not permitted to pursue an education beyond high school when she was a young woman and that negatively affected her self esteem. She felt that if you did not go to college you were not as important. She was not allowed to go to college because she was led to believe she was not as smart as some people and that perception was reinforced so she did not go to college and it affected how she felt about herself. One of the important things that Elizabeth discovered in the Circles was that education was accessible to her and she could pursue it on her own behalf and others in her Circle.

It wasn't about the pay. They never did tell you that if you paid you could go, you understand? I learned that here, because I was told that if you didn't finish college or go to college you didn't accomplish anything. A lot of people think like that, you know they do. I really thought that all my life and I cried when I first went to college, I cried in class. He said 'why are you crying?' and I said, 'I'm finally here'. That had put like a depression thing on me that had hindered me from going forward but after I started going to school I walked like a jet. I said, 'damn, I can do it'. I always thought I couldn't because I had three children, you know and got married and everything.

The importance that Elizabeth placed on going to college was based on socially reinforced perceptions of who she was and what she was capable of accomplishing. She credits the Circles for helping her break through those preconceptions about who she was and believes that the Circle actually forced her to develop self esteem. The work she did in the Circle helped her unpack all those issues she had about her own self

worth and many of them related to educational achievement. The support of the Circle reinforced her new emerging belief in her own value. She went on to take classes not because she wanted a degree but because she knew she could go and it had become accessible to her. She was also able to redefine herself around goals that made sense to her and she has accomplished many of them. She is no longer intimidated by others and what they have achieved believing her record of achievement compares well to anyone else's.

I have accomplished just as much as they have [people with good credentials] without the education. I have accomplished goals for myself. I have accomplished every last one of them. I bet you they can't all say that. I conquered my sickness, overcoming what I said I'd be overcoming. I said I want to walk and I want to talk and I am going, see! [as she walks through the room] , I'm going to be able to drive and I told the lady get out of my way. I know, watch my smoke.

Elizabeth's independence increased as her self esteem increased. She had been a people pleaser, careful not to do anything to upset her husband, son, or daughter and would not think to go out without having someone with her. Her involvement in the Circles of Hope helped her become more engaged in the broader community and now she is evangelical in her belief in getting outside of ones own needs and becoming involved in helping people in the community.

I was minding my own business and staying in my house doing nothing, thinking I couldn't do anything because I wasn't qualified to do that until through the Circle it brought it out that I can do things...You can make a difference in somebody's life. Uncle Sam wants you! Elizabeth wants you! I believe in you! Somehow we have to believe in them [others in the community].



*Self advocacy and creating change.* Elizabeth has learned through her affiliation with the Circles of Hope how to advocate on her own behalf and advocacy has become an important part of who she is. She has relied on the support she received from her Circles to figure out how to speak on her own behalf on a number of complicated issues. What she most appreciates about the Circle is the sharing, caring, and conversation. The Circle serves as a place where she can engage in conversation with people she cares about and care about her, who will not tell her what to do but will share their perspectives and experiences with similar kinds of issues helping her understand what is happening so Elizabeth can make a good decision about what to do.

One of the keys for her has been to overcome her fear of asking questions and looking stupid in the process. When she decided to go to school she had to overcome that fear.

I learned how to get in school, what classes to take, I didn't know what to take I just wanted to go to school, take anything. They [the school] said 'no, you got to do something to get to a point. You can't go with no points.' I said oh, okay but see I learned that but I was afraid to ask and look stupid.

Elizabeth credits the Circle with teaching her how to advocate for herself. The people, the process, the questions have all contribute to the development of her capacity to advocate and speak on her own behalf.

It's made a difference to me because I know I can do it. They've given me tenacity, they've given me how to be an advocate, how to speak up. They've given me what questions to ask instead of not asking at all, stop thinking that any question you ask is stupid, no question is a stupid question. So I've learned how that if I didn't know something to ask-

anything. I used to be afraid...Now I have clarity in everything I do so that kind of keeps me from making mistakes.

Elizabeth has also become an advocate for others helping them develop their own capacities for self advocacy. She has applied what she has learned in the Circle to help others make some of the same discoveries she has made. She does this purposefully.

I meet the people where they are and I ask them what they want. Like I said, I used to assume she's upset because...she lost her mother, we already know that, we've established that. That may not be the problem I am just assuming it. That she's upset about her mother. Her mom could have been a terrible mother, God forbid, so I've learned how to ask. It's better to be asked up than asked down so I wait and if the people want to talk I say, 'would you like to talk about it now' and they'll say yes or no.

She really wants to make a difference and has been able to use her own experiences advocating for herself to help others develop their own capacity for creating their own personal change. Elizabeth wants to provide support but also allow room for people to set their own parameters on their relationship with her. In one example Elizabeth talked about a man she was teaching how to use the computer. He was retired and had been really down with little to do in his retirement. Elizabeth started helping him learn how to use computers. Her relationship with him was one on one and her philosophy was nurturing and supportive. She wanted him to know she cared about his learning. After developing some computer skills he picked up two part-time jobs.

Elizabeth has developed into a tireless advocate for community change. She recognizes her skills as an advocate can be applied to community situations and she has some experience in that as well. In one story she talked about how a personal incident she was involved in led to broader changes in the community. She was driving

down a street one afternoon when the road underneath her car collapsed and her car literally fell into a hole in the road. The stress of the accident triggered a stroke which left her unable to walk and Bell's Palsey which left her unable to speak. She recovered from both the stroke and the palsy and was able to leverage her accident into community improvements and the city made numerous improvements in the infrastructure. They fixed all the streets, lighting, and some sidewalks and she has become a bit of a local hero in her own neighborhood.

*Cross generational sharing.* One of the early Circles was a multi-generational Circle that that Elizabeth appreciated greatly. Elizabeth felt like she learned a lot from the wisdom of the older women who in their own way provided lots of encouragement to do things when she did not feel she had the strength or energy.

So with the Wise Women the older women, older than me, a lot of them were. We've lost a lot of them but I've taken what they've given me, what they've left here. They've helped me. I remember Makeda's mother saying, Elizabeth, you got to get on up there, you can't lay there now, can't lay there. I said, 'Mother I'm not too good'. 'That's no good, you can't lay there. Get up whether you're too good or not!' And I remembered that. So a lot of times I'd get up and do what mother said, don't lay there (laughing). Get up and get with it.

Throughout the interview with Elizabeth there were many references to the wisdom of her elders and she expressed a strong value for being able to access that wisdom, apply it in her own life, and pass it on to others. The Circles, particularly the Wise Women Circles, where she was able to tap into the wisdom of multiple generations of women were important to her and her own personal development. Two Circles that Elizabeth was fond of are both cross-generational. One is Wise Women and the other is the Grandparents as Parents Circle, where the focus is on developing support systems

for grandparents raising their children's babies. A third Circle was actually a collaborative agreement between WomanSpirit and an organization that provides residential facilities and access to high quality education for children of modest means who have been through some sort of trauma like the loss of a parent. Many of these kids were removed from their homes and neighborhoods and placed in a group home setting and moved to schools where they had no peer group or family support structure. WomanSpirit was asked to work with the young women in their program to set up a Circle with a support system to help the young women make connections to a culture outside of their group home.

Elizabeth focuses a lot of her energy on programs for young people that engage them with adults and she also focuses some of her energy reaching out to seniors. It is a way to link to other generations such as the young people and the senior citizens.

...now what I'm doing is doing volunteer work with senior citizens in my neighborhood where before I wouldn't have done that. I wouldn't have done that...I'm a senior...What I'm also trying to do now [in her community] is be more active in the community services to children with the baseball and soccer and girls stuff. I will get more involved with her through my grandchild and through my other grandchild with the Olympics. I'm getting ready to go to that.

*Learning for development.* Elizabeth's value for education is based in her own love of learning and once she learned that education was accessible to her Elizabeth got involved in a number of programs, often on behalf of the Circles. The computer courses were some of her favorite and she applied what she learned in her computer programs to her own development and the development of others.

I wanted to go but I wanted to go because it was a challenge and it needed to be done. That was another way of me helping our Circle. I

didn't have money but I could go to school and come back and help, learn one teach one, that's our motto, learn one teach one. So when I came back taught those who wanted to learn, not everybody wanted to learn, basic computer skills.

Her computer skills became very important to her later when her son had an accident and went into a coma in Pennsylvania. She felt isolated from the situation and was able to use the computer to look things up about his condition. She visited chat lines and people with children that had brain surgery. It was an important lifeline during a very difficult time for her.

When she came back from her training she wanted to apply her learning by sharing what she learned with others in the Circle but she would get so excited that no one was able to understand or comprehend what she was talking about. She credits the support of the Circle with teaching her the patience she needed to calm herself enough to be a resource to others. She learned patience by participating in the dialogues of the Circles and learning how to listen to what others had to say. Concentrating on their stories and perspectives, even when they were foreign or confusing to her helped her to learn from those situations and apply how they communicated and did things to her own situation. She learned basic participatory meeting methods by participating in meetings and these were the tools she needed in order to be effective and share her own learning.

When Elizabeth was ready to share her learning about computers with the others in her Circle they set up a small computer lab at the Imani Center which she was in charge of managing and maintaining. She began to offer her computer courses for those in the Circles and others in the community. One group whose story she was very proud of included a group of homeless men from the Salvation Army. She had five guys she worked with over time training them how to use computers.

My guys were on TV at Christmas the year before last. Five of them, five of my guys that were homeless, didn't have jobs, didn't have no connection to their families, didn't have no e-mail addresses, didn't know how to work the computer. The guys that I taught, all of them got their own e-mail, their own place. They're established. They are now working for the Salvation Army, helping other people...We take everybody with us and that's how I taught my class and they got up! They got up and the guys were on the TV and I'll never forget it, they was ringing the bell. They had my guys up there talking, looking good, talking intelligent...you would never know they were homeless.

Elizabeth's most current project really explores the growth of her own learning, her passion for education and her commitment to making sure other young people who may harbor aspirations to go to college will have some help and encouragement getting there. Over the past couple of years she realized through her own trials that people do no't know how to get their children ready to go to college even if they want to go. She ran into this problem getting her own children and grandchildren prepared to go. The support of the Circles made it possible for her to get her family prepared but she wanted to help other kids in the community as well.

She began a program at her church to get kids prepared for college. The project helped the students get their grades up, they raised money, and they helped the youth get through all the college entry paperwork. These are things that many people in her community just do not know how to do. They do not have the experience with the process or the institutions to do the basic things necessary to get their kids in college.

We have eight kids going to college that's already prepared, the paperwork is already in order...we started it last year and they already have places in college, they've already got their academics up a couple of

notches as far as their grade point average to show them so they can get in a better school than just going to any school. So we've got eight of them going to college. Then we have a fundraising to help them. We do fundraising once a month to help them because some of them are from city homes, some of them don't have any parents and the ones that don't have parents we try to adopt some things for them...Through this we're showing the kids how to get ready for school because I never knew because I didn't have that.

In addition to the direct support to the kids she is developing relationships with some of the schools locally that the young people might be interested in attending so that they can have some of the advantages that other kids have going to school.

The worst one in the bunch, that's who you're going after. We're not going after the ones so much that you know will make it. We're going after the ones that umm, kind of iffy is he going to make it—let's try and help them a little bit because if he's going to jail he's going someplace...we've got other options, they can go to Rankin or something like that. So I'm trying to do some volunteer work down there and I'm going to different schools like that so I can get in the door in order to get the young children in.

*Hospitality.* Elizabeth takes pride in ensuring that when people come to participate in a Circle at the Imani Family Center that they are treated well. When there is a program and she is able to help she is always right in the middle of the action making sure that everyone has enough to eat, a comfortable place to sit, and feels safe enough to participate. Her ability to make people feel welcome and comfortable is something she knows she can bring to every Circle.

A lot of times people come here hungry, they don't have breakfast, they don't have food in their house. They don't have anything. We feed them and that kind of relaxes you and that makes you more gentle. If they're thirsty give them some water, if they want some coffee, give them some coffee and ...hospitality has a lot to do with how you make somebody feel comfortable. I've learned how to do that, be hospitable, I am very hospitable. I am the hostess with the mostest.

Hospitality is something she believes is important to the work that goes on a Circle. It contributes to making people feel safe, comfortable and able to concentrate on the real business of the Circle. Hospitality is how Elizabeth lets people know that she can be trusted. That she is someone who people can look to for assistance and that is important to her.

We have to be a beacon light without the candles sitting in the window that you know that you can come to me or come to the center to get help. There's help here and they still have them in Pennsylvania—that's what that means—that means that's a safe house for you if the car breaks down or if you're lost, that's a safe haven and they still have them there mostly up in the Amish, mostly out in the country. You see a few houses when you first come into the city. When I was little they was everywhere. That used to be a safe haven signal. That's what I want to be a beacon light without being in the window just shining. If you could look at me and say 'she might be able to help me'. That's what I want to be I want to be the person you can come to because you have confidence in me.

### *Summary*

Each of these stories presents a different perspective on the Circles of Hope process as experienced by the seven women. They discussed how it has contributed to



their own to personal growth and increased their capacity to create change in the community. It was clear through some of the examples they shared that they had a fair amount of success.

Makeda's perspective is a complicated one. As the originator of the process she has insights about what the process was created to do and how it works. She mentioned some of her influences and how it developed. She is also a skilled facilitator in that she is able to help people derive great benefit from being a participant in the process that can aide them in their own development. Her style of facilitation is that of the animator, someone who also participates in the Circle as someone with a perspective to share. Her breadth of experience and understanding make her contributions often as valuable as her abilities to facilitate and manage the process. She is also part of the target group so her own leadership and experience have developed as a result of her work with the Circles of Hope and she has traveled the world and participated in many events where she was able to share her perspectives on many issues.

Aeshe has a personal connection to the Circles of Hope through her relationship with the women in the Circles she has been a part of at the Imani Family Center. She has developed a support network that has made it possible for her to extend herself into the community as a facilitator of the process. She uses her gift as a facilitator to help other people solve problems and get engaged in their community. She has a lot of passion and wants to 'save the world'. She does this in her own way facilitating the Circles of Hope process with groups in her own community.

Debbie has taken much from her engagement in the Circles of Hope process. As a public policy analyst and community activist she is able to use the skills she has learned in the Circle to engage a broader section of the public in shaping policy. The tools she has learned and the insights she has gained as a member of a Circle have

made her better able to work with groups of people she would not have sought out earlier because their views were different from hers. Some of this is a result of the diversity of people she has been able to meet in the Circle and the wide variety of perspectives she has been exposed to. She understands the value of getting the average person involved in shaping public policy and uses the skills and knowledge she acquired in the Circle to help people share their perspectives and become informed about how policy affects them so they can make their own choices and contributions to the process.

Danielle's story is a good one in that she came to the Circle wanting to give and she was able to do that. She shared her experiences and perspectives in the Circle and got involved as a volunteer at the Imani Family Center. She also gained a lot from her experiences and it literally broadened her view of the world, deepened her relationships, and increased her ability to effect change. The insights she gained as a participant have actually made it possible for her to give more. She is becoming a facilitator of the process and extending her interpretation of the Circles of Hope process to other parts of the community.

Obie plays a foundational role in the Circle. She represents the group in the community, gathers resources, and connects people to those resources. She is a good connector, helping people see the connections between different events by relating them to her own past. She likes being part of a group and is an important part of a Circles support system because of her vast network. She in turn receives the support she needs and is able to find the focus she needs to stay on task. Obie is important to maintaining the continuity of a Circle. She can be counted on to show up.

The Circles of Hope opened up a world of opportunities for Gene. She was able to seek refuge and safety in the place when times were difficult for her. The support has been critical to her development. The Circle has provided the place where she was

educated on the issues of the day, learned skills important to her like financial management and literally transformed her perspective on the community, her role as a citizen and her ability as an agent of change. Her willingness to get involved and share the resources, knowledge and skills she has are attributed to her participation in the Circles of Hope.

Elizabeth experienced some remarkable personal growth through the Circle. She learned how to speak for herself. The Circle provided encouragement and support for her as she pursued her own development, going to school, and learning computers. It also gave her an outlet for sharing her experiences. She really wanted to give back and she was successful in doing that with her computer classes and projects for her school. Her story is one of personal growth and transformation. She developed her ability to effectively advocate for herself and has learned how to use those skills on behalf of others in her community.

In this chapter the stories of the women were presented around key themes that emerged during the analysis of their statements and these themes serve to shape how their stories will be interpreted. In the next chapter the stories will be analyzed by looking across the experiences to identify key themes that the stories share. In the last chapter the finding will be presented as a way of beginning the process of creating a model for community change based on the Circles of Hope process.

## Chapter Five Cross Case Analysis

Chapter five is a cross-case analysis of the seven case studies presented in Chapter four. The purpose of the cross-case analysis is to see what can be learned by comparing across the cases. It allows for examining, identifying, and highlighting similarities and differences across cases that share a comparable profile which in study includes the experiences of the seven women with the Circles of Hope process (Miles & Huberman, 1984). The seven cases will be analyzed across the themes of the process experience, personal growth and change, and engagement in community. By analyzing within and across the cases experiences were identified that participants shared in common and that distinguished them from one another. This will begin the process of building a theory of adult learning based on the experiences of these women with Circles of Hope.

For the purpose of analysis sub-themes were explored within the three major themes of 1) process experience, 2) personal growth and change and 3) engagement in community. The reality is that they are inter-related. For instance, place will be discussed as part of the process experience but it clearly plays a role in personal growth and change and engagement in community. The rationale for analyzing place as part of the process experience is because the setting contributes to how the process works. The three themes also build on one another. The process contributes to personal growth and change and both contribute to engagement in the community.

### *The Process Experience*

The Circles of Hope process experience includes exploring common sub-themes as they relate to the experiences of the women with the process. It is not an exploration of how the process works but more an exploration of their experiences with the process. What was it about the process itself that stood out for them as participants or as

facilitators that may contribute to their personal growth and change and their capacity for engagement in the community. Sub-themes identified by looking across the case studies included a safe place, meaning making, shared leadership, diversity and faith.

*Safe place.* Makeda mentioned that the Circles provided a safe place to talk about important issues and this was something about that stood out for her about the Circles of Hope process. “The Circle as a safe place stands out for me that people come in and feel safe enough to talk about things that may have been difficult for them to discuss in other places.” Others also talked about the Circle being a safe place and they did it within two contexts. One was the physical environment or the space and the other was the trust that the process itself engendered. The Imani Family Center provides an environment in the community where the difficult work of addressing issues of change can occur. The place adds to their learning capacity by creating a sanctuary for the women to develop their own voice. All the participants talked about how they felt when they were there; it is cozy, comfortable, spiritual, relaxing, rejuvenating, never negative, and serene. Elizabeth described it as:

An ideal place for a woman or a man...We saw a need for a place for all kinds of women. It wasn't just black women. We all had different colors but we all had some of the same problems just our skin was different.

Most of the women interviewed are deeply religious in that they have incorporated their spiritual lives into their daily activities. The Circles of Hope process is a reflection of their spiritual and religious lives. They take comfort in the fact that the place used to be a convent. Danielle called it “spiritual”, Gene talked about its “life”, Aeshe called it “sacred ground”, and later mentioned that the religious history of the buildings was a comfort to her. She also believes that the Circles were extending the religious tradition of the place in their own way. Debbie said, “The fact that it used to be a convent, I like that. It feels like it's a woman's place so you do never feel like you're in

a place where women's issues are secondary. They're always the first thing and it pretty much revolves around concerns of women." These things all contributed to make the place feel safe and comfortable to them.

Another element of creating a safe place is linked more directly to the process itself. The ground rules were often mentioned as an element of the process that contributed a safe environment. Makeda talked about the ground rules specifically as creating an environment where people feel like they were encouraged to participate. Several of the others touched on this as well. Danielle, whose perspective tends to be that of someone who wants to help others participate said, "We the people in the Circle are not going to judge you, think differently about you when it's over or tell other people outside the Circle." She is talking about the ground rules that participants identify with and build trust in the process and the facilitator. Others mentioned that time limits, no advice, and everyone have a chance to speak once before anyone else can speak twice all contribute to creating a trusting environment where people feel safe and encouraged to participate.

As someone who has been an observer of this group for a number of years, I have seen how the place and the process work together to create an environment where they can engage with other members of the community on their own terms. This is important because when people from other groups, organizations, businesses, and government, join them in a dialogue at the Imani Family Center WomanSpirit is the host and has the opportunity to represent themselves in a way that reflects what is important to them. This is not always possible in other venues. Makeda summed it up well when she said, "...it fits us [the place], we changed it to reflect our interests and who we are and as we walk around we can see ourselves in the place."

*Meaning making.* Several of the participants discussed how the Circles of Hope helped them develop a deeper understanding of a specific issue they were confronting.

Sometimes it was a personal situation that was better understood such as when Elizabeth was able to analyze her own history and develop a deeper understanding of why she was not able to go to college. She had been told she was not good enough and had internalized that and once she was able to break that down she was able to change her self concept and go to school. In other instances the Circle contributed towards a better understanding of how society functions such as when Debbie credited the Circle with helping her understand the how everything is integrated from top to bottom. She believes that what happens in the community is integrated with what happened in society. This realization led her to question her methods of working on public policy issues were inadequate and she changed her practice.

Analysis occurs when they are sharing their stories, listening to their peers and reflecting on what they hear linking the stories of their peers to their own experiences. When there is a dialogue on education participants share their experiences with education good and bad. When someone, Elizabeth for instance, has a passion for education and is participating in a Circle on education she will hear stories of others' experiences with education and it helps her place her own story in a larger context. She will also explore education from the framework of the three questions. What, what is happening? So what, why is it important? Now what, now what are we going to do about it? The questions are simple but when skillfully facilitated provide a context for discussing an issue that lead participants to begin to analyze an issue or situation that makes change possible. Gene said it well when she talked about how the Circle helped her understand how the community affected her life.

If you're not in a Circle you...you don't really think about things that's going on in the world other than watching TV...and you don't know if it really impacts your life and how it impacts your life. The Circle has let me know how different aspects of government impacts my life and how it's

not just the US government. It's the local government and we've go to start at the local government to make change.

*Shared leadership.* Shared leadership is based in the capacity of the group to provide leadership as needed to the leadership of the Circle. Makeda described shared leadership this way:

The other strength of the process has to do something like the geese and their model of shared leadership. There are enough people here now that know how to do all the parts of the Circle so that if I pass someone else can take over leadership, that it is our joint effort that supports the leader and the leaders work and so I think that that's important that the leadership can and is shared and responsibilities are divided according to people's interest and abilities and sometimes not even abilities but the need to get things done.

This model was reflected in the comments of several of the women when they talked about the Circle, the roles they play in a Circle and in terms of how they participate in the community. For instance, when Aeshe talked about her concept of shared leadership she discussed it within the context of being active.

If you watch for an opportunity there is something you can do. You don't have to be a facilitator, like I'm doing this group tomorrow, but I could pass out flyers for someone else that was doing it or I could make some phone calls or greet people at the door. So active is being active.

Elizabeth actually defines the Circle around shared leadership. She believes that the Circles bring together people with a diversity of skills and interests and that is what gives a Circle its unique quality. The people bring the gifts they have and everyone contributes them as part of the Circle.



...when we have 7 to 10 different kinds of personalities and 7 to 10 of us can do 10 different things. Like I'm the only one who worked with Ford, Ola worked in the Army; Amy got a Masters, 2 or 3 of them, Gene, real estate. We all had different vocations but we all have one commonality and it's helping the community and helping each other be the best that they can be.

*Diversity.* Everyone loves the diversity of the Circle. People from many places have visited the Imani Family Center and participated in a Circle. The women who participated in this study have all been participants in multiple Circles so they have had the opportunity to participate meet a wide array people. They have met with International guests, women from their neighborhood, young people, women from other parts of the City, and women from New York and Appalachia that are also engaged in similar kinds of development work.

The diversity of the participants provides a rich set of perspectives that contribute to the learning in a Circle. Debbie, Elizabeth, and Gene all talked about how they were able to meet people from around the world and that broadened their perspective. Danielle focused on a relationship she developed with a woman who had been in prison and it changed how she saw women and prison which led to some reflection on her own learning.

They all have interests in working with different people, some because of the mission work that they want to do such as Danielle and her interest in youth development, Aeshe and her interest in the homeless, or Debbie's interest in working with the poor. When the Circle is diverse they are likely have the opportunity to engage in dialogues where there are people present who are facing or working with some of the issues they have an interest in including poverty, homelessness, and youth development.

Another aspect of diversity with a common thread throughout the interviews was that through the Circles the women were able to better understand their differences and find common ground. Elizabeth called in commonality

The women have a yearning and a hunger to help and I've seen all the women that came here from Africa, Botswana, and the women from the Delta. We all had a commonality to want to be better for our families, for our communities, and for ourselves.

When they talk about the diverse groups of people they meet they tend to focus on what they learn, how it often challenged their view of the world, and how they were able to find some commonality as women or people.

*Faith.* Faith plays an important role in the lives of most of the women interviewed. First, most of the women have a strong religious faith that is an important part of their identity. Involvement in their churches is an important part of their religious and social lives. However, for a couple of the women the nature of the relationship to their church is changing. Aeshe is critical of her church stating, "The church is not there the way it used to be. I don't know what the difference is but I know it is not there. When I was growing up that mainly was our controlling force, church." She believes that church doesn't play the same role socializing the community that it once did and the seriousness of some of the social issues in her community are partly the result of that lack of leadership. She would like to see the church more directly involved in addressing community issues.

Danielle's faith has taken her to another church to help them set up a youth program. She is still active in her own church but she believes that by volunteering the youth program at the new church she can make a difference in that community. She believes there is a need at the other church for the talents she has to share. This type of interaction is unusual in her community and is transformational in that she is intentionally

building bridges across faith communities. In describing her involvement in another church Danielle said,

I don't know if I would even have done that if I didn't have a wider screen (view of the world) because traditionally you don't belong to one church and then you go over here and work at another church. I stepped out there because I just see a bigger picture. I really see a bigger picture now and it is unorthodox and I probably would not have done it before but because I have learned in the Circle you've just got to go where the need is. If there's something you can do to help you got to stop letting barriers be a reason that you don't.

Another aspect of faith is a very strong belief that if they keep working on things—doing the best that they can—things will take care of themselves. This is very important because it sustains efforts well beyond what many would consider feasible and this impacts their capacity to create societal change because they operate from a different set of values than most people. Several of the women described the many different roles they play in the broader community and they do so even when the economic costs are high because they believe it is something they need to do to stay true to their value system and is required by their faith. They often use their faith to help encourage others. Elizabeth relied heavily on her faith when she was teaching the homeless men how to work with computers. She was relying on her own faith to show her faith in the men and provide encouragement.

...just a little something to let them know I got faith in them. You can do it.

This is something we learned through the Circles. How to encourage one another, how to strengthen a person when they're feeling down mentally and spiritually...we've learned that through the Circles, how to look at a person or just listen, a lot of times we just listen, to see where they're at and you go where they are and then we'll come up together.

### *Personal Growth and Change*

Personal growth and change considers the factors effecting the personal growth and change of the participants. The premise is that being part of a Circle has led to personal growth and change and explores some of the factors that seemed to be common across the cases as they describe the relationship between their involvement in the Circles of Hope and their own personal growth and change. Factors that emerged included focus, changing world view, taking risks, exploring identity and developing voice.

*Focus.* Several of the women talked about how they have used the Circles of Hope process as a tool for sorting through issues and identify important aspects of the issue that they can address from those that serve as distractions. This makes it possible for them to respond more effectively. Danielle has used the process be more focused on her business.

It has really helped me become more focused. It was critical because I don't work a traditional job and because I don't work a traditional job it is more important for me to be focused now because in a job you can just get up and go...some of the things I have learned here have helped me stay focused in my business so that I can make money and pay my bills.

Obie talked about the importance of the questions in helping her find focus or clarity of purpose, answering the "what", "so what", and "now what", questions. The questions help her get focused on what it is she wants to accomplish. It could be a simple set of tasks such what role she is going to play in facilitating a Circle or it could be her role in implementing an ongoing project like working on the House of David. She has used the process regularly to help her stay on task. Because of her health concerns she is sensitive to being focused and even asked at the conclusion of the interview if she stayed on task.

The strength of the process is that, for me, it provides a real focus, you don't wander off here and there but you are focused on this particular question...The direct questions are good for me. They once again, get that focus through the direct questions. The follow-up questions if something is not clear....and the support that comes from the Circle and the process.

Aeshe talked about how the process helped her focus so that she could get rid of baggage, emotional and physical and it improved her decision-making by helping her make better decisions faster. The Circle helped the women break issues down into smaller pieces that they can more easily manage and address so they can make better decisions about what to do.

*Changing worldview.* The Circles of Hope have helped broaden the worldviews of several of the women. The process does this through the variety of perspectives that are present in a Circle. The change in perspective can even be the result of the testimony of a single person such as Danielle's experience with a woman who had been in prison.

...I know there are women in prison but I always think prison is for men so it changed my whole perspective to see women who are ex offenders and are now back in society and are doing well. It showed me that wow, you can even overcome going to prison and come out and do well.

The woman's experience challenged her to rethink her preconceptions about women and prison. A powerful aspect of that change was what she learned about herself while she was reflecting on that experience.

I was really happy that I had grown to the point where I did not judge because I would admit, there was a time I would have been, well so what,

you did what you did and you had to do your time and all but I didn't see it that way anymore.

Danielle credited the Circle with helping her become less judgmental and more open to different perspectives. A more common experience is where the change in perspective occurs over time as the result of participation in the Circles and reflecting on those experiences. Most of the change the women discussed was more cumulative. It was not a single Circle that led to their new perspective.

Gene told the story of a perspective change that she went through that is a good example of someone whose view changed over time. In this passage she describes how participation in the Circles of Hope helped her to get a broader sense of what she was going through when she lost her job.

By listening to other people and how they perceive their lives and how they've gotten out of different predicaments, that they've figured out some way to circumvent the problem, I think that's how I realized, I wasn't the only one out of a job. I hadn't been out of one in my life but so what. I wasn't the first. I must have thought I was going to be the only one or something. I got through it.

Participation in the Circles helped Gene realize she was not unique in her experience. This change in perspective made possible a range of different options in terms of being able to accept assistance and support from others with similar experiences. One of the interesting consequences of an expanding worldview is that once Gene's perspective changed and became broader in scope and more sophisticated in its composition she realized that she was not alone in her situation. Gene learned others have been through similar situations and survived and all of a sudden there were many other stories that were of value and relevance to her experience.

Makeda discussed the Circle as an ongoing process and this may contribute to the cumulative effect of the learning Circle. A Circle may explore themes from one session to another as long as there is an interest within the Circle in continuing the exploration. While Danielle's story is a case where one story helped her change her view, it can also be seen as something that happened over time. When she noted that the woman's story helped her realize that she was not as judgmental as she had once been, her realization was likely not because of the one experience but more likely the cumulative effect of participating in Circles over time. What the woman's story helped her realize was that the change had happened. Elizabeth has a similar experience with her own transformation. She credits the Circle for helping her change the way she thought about herself. She found this liberating and led her to become more involved in her community.

I was minding my own business and staying in my house doing nothing, thinking I couldn't do anything because I wasn't qualified to do that until through the Circle it came out that I can do things...you can make a difference in somebody's life.

Elizabeth's change in perspective contributed directly to her becoming an agent of change in her community. Several of the women shared similar stories.

*Taking risks.* Another consistent theme in the stories of these women is they are doing things differently for themselves because of their affiliation with the Circles of Hope. They are crediting the Circles with their participation in activities and projects they would not have done if it were not for their association with the Circles of Hope. Elizabeth went to school, Obie became an Ursuline Associate, Danielle received a summer position teaching at the freedom school, Gene became a volunteer in her neighborhood, Aeshe worked with senior citizens, and Debbie became engaged in dialogue with groups that were her natural opposition. These are all things that may not

have happened were it not for the learning opportunities and experiences they had in the Circle.

The Circle has provided a forum for learning where these women were able to discuss and learn about a variety of different things some fairly simple and others quite complex that affected their own development. In each case the women are doing something different as a result. Obie talked about the Circle as a method of learning.

If you've been through the fire and you can tell me, I don't have to go.

You save me some trouble or you provide some insight I maybe didn't have it before. So those are the kinds of things I get from the Circle and sometimes it is just a matter of what's said and how it's said that makes it clear or touches your heart.

The learning is often translated into some kind of action such as the advocacy work that Debbie and Elizabeth are engaged in. They are both taking risks implementing ideas they developed in the Circle. Debbie is working to incorporate more grassroots people in shaping public policy which is a concept not favored on the right or left. Elizabeth took a risk going to school and then setting up her own computer courses. The risk taking itself is tied to the process. The three main elements of the Circle education, support and planning for action contribute to risk taking by creating an environment where the women are able to try new things in a safe environment. The women know they have the support of the Circle when they are ready to try their ideas in the broader community and this support provides them with encouragement and limits the amount of risk they feel that are taking because the Circle is backing them up.

*Exploring identity.* There were two direct references to identity in the case studies. Debbie discussed identity extensively in her interview and Makeda discusses it in hers. The others revealed their experiences in dealing with issues of identity in some of the stories and experiences they shared. Debbie mentioned it in a learning context.



The Circle provided an opportunity for her to explore issues of race, ethnicity, culture, and others with very diverse groups of people representing a lot of different identity groups. Makeda discussed how Circles of Hope was established to try to contradict the notion of poor women as victims or not having any recommendations for their own issues which is linked to identity. Her identity as a poor woman made it difficult to deal with certain groups and individuals because they just saw someone who was a victim and incapable of taking care of herself. Elizabeth and Aeshe felt something similar because of their education status. The Circles provide a forum for exploring the issues that come with their various identities such as race, religion, ethnicity, education level, income, marital status, health, and others.

Debbie discussed learning more about women from Russia through the stories they shared in a dialogue and the opportunities she had to learn about the culture of the African American women by becoming a part of their lives in the Circle, engaging in long discussions and experiencing the culture by going to church and participating in family events. The Circle was a place where they discussed some of the challenges associated with certain identities such as race, disability, or the lack of a formal education. These are issues the women are confronting on a regular basis. What the women expressed as important to them as they dealt with identity was linked back to the safe environment that the process provided. When Makeda noted that “the people come in and feel safe enough to talk about things that may have been difficult to discuss in other places,” issues of identity often fall into that category.

*Personal support.* The developmental aspect of the Circles of Hope provides a place for the women to grow at their own pace. Support makes it possible for them to get through the issues of the day, gives them hope that if they continue the struggle they will create change for themselves and their community, and connects them to other resources in the community. Gene discusses how the support system works for her.

The Circle makes you pull things out of you that you really don't know you've got. We always support each other. When someone had a death in the family we were all there, when someone gets sick we are all here. Whatever it is...it gave me the ability to think of other people other than myself. Working with the different groups has been a heck of an experience that you can't pay for.

Personal support can take a number of forms. The support of the group often makes it possible for them to reach outside of their reality and become engaged in addressing broader societal issues that may impact them or the people they care about. Personal support also helps them meet the day-to-day challenges of life in urban America. They all mentioned personal benefits they received from the support of the Circle that made a difference to them. Sometimes it was a little money to help them put a little gas in the car. Other times it was the use of a car. Oftentimes support took the form of counsel that helped them get through a crisis. For instance, one-on-one discussions helped a number of the women resolve issues for themselves or someone else. Aeshe shared a story of how she received personal support that made it possible for her to help someone else.

Within our Circle there is a broader Circle where people kind of help each other, call and ask what can "I" do, or do you know what to do? So I called Makeda and asked what would be a solution to the problem a lady was having with the foster kids because they were calling in, lying about her. She said, 'give them back'. Get out of the foster care business because they were going to ruin her reputation.

The support in this case took the form of advice about a difficult situation but it was solicited advice and provided a perspective on the issue that Aeshe had not considered. A reputation is very important to many people in their community and it was

Makeda's advice to ensure the woman protected her reputation because the way the situation was going they would likely take the kids away from her and ruin her reputation. This type of personal support is important to these women who are often asked to confront complex issues. The support provides access to different perspectives and resources and contradicts social isolation. Personal support gives them more confidence and security. They are also part of a Circle where the support is freely offered and it is not a tit-for-tat score keeping system. Gene summed it up well when she was discussing how the process supported her when she had lost her job.

The Circles really helped me because I came over here and I kind of lost myself in doing the work around here everyday and I never really dwelt on losing my job, I left that up to my attorney, where I would have been depressed and down. I got a little stipend. It wasn't much but it kept the little nickels and dimes in my pocket. I could go and have lunch every now and then, you know, so that really, really, helped me.

Gene later won her lawsuit and went back to work and she has maintained her association with the Circles and has given back at every opportunity.

*Developing voice.* The development of voice in this theme and engagement in the "Engaging in Community" theme are closely related. The Development of voice is the process of learning how to not only express the ideas and opinions grounded in a personal experience such as "telling your story" but then being able to move beyond that to engage in discussions on a range of issues. "Coming to voice is not just the act of telling one's experience. It is using that telling strategy to come to voice so that you can also speak freely about other subjects" (hooks, 1994, p. 148). The change process that some of the women describe in their stories is essentially the process of developing voice. Gene talked about how her lifestyle was fairly isolated.

I wasn't going too or doing a lot of things in the community. I was just really staying at home. I wasn't doing a lot of anything. I wasn't doing a lot of socializing or anything like that so it gave me something to do...

Gene got involved in the Circles because she wanted to connect more directly to people and her community. She had social and community interests at heart and because of the opportunity to be part of a Circle her perspectives grew and developed because of the diverse range of topics and issues that were discussed.

We talk about what's going on in the world here and the economy and what affects change and what affects the ability to get things changed and I think the Circle has some input into me stepping up which I usually wouldn't have stepped up.

There is a connection between participating in the Circle and being broadly engaged in the community. Gene's story is the process of going from being unengaged in the community to being engaged in the community. The journey included the development of her voice. In Gene's case she was trying to end her isolation and she used her participation in the Circle to participate in wide ranging discussions. The things she learned and witnessed led to her becoming more involved in her community. She is still focused on those issues which she knows best but she is out there engaged in creating community change.

Elizabeth had a similar story. She began her interview by talking about how she had never been part of any group or organization.

I had never been part of any group thing and then at that time you had to know somebody to get in so if you didn't know nobody you weren't getting in but Make was open and said ok.

Elizabeth has undergone a tremendous amount of change. She is now the president of the Board of Directors. She was able to use her participation in the Circle to

understand what was keeping her from her goals. She used the support of the group and the forum of the Circle to develop her own voice and she became a self advocate and then a community advocate.

The Circle provides a forum for the sharing of experiences which is an element of developing one's voice. The process provides a forum for sharing that helps people learn how to effectively express themselves and opens people up to new experiences and ways of seeing things. Makeda reflected on the importance of using the Circle to bring in other voices out there in the community.

It's helpful to have new voices and new faces talking about things that we may not know a lot about. Younger people like Tracy that came in and wanted to do poetry, floetry is what they call it, so they want to do floetry, hip hop, poetry and journaling...they wanted to do a lot with writing and performing. That really wasn't what something that we ever thought about but we let them come over, let them perform and enjoyed it and then saw some kinship between what they were doing and what they might be able to help our kids with.

In this case they were helping Tracy and her group with the development of their voices by providing a forum for them to share what they were learning and developing in an environment that would help them grow their own perspective. Their participation also contributed to the development of the Circle by providing a perspective they had not considered before.

Voice is about expression and participation. Developing voice is the process of learning how to name one's experiences. It is about a person choosing to participate and express themselves in way that reflects their values and their principles as well as their self interests. It is also about how they communicate with people different from

themselves and add their perspectives to a public deliberation or dialogue. Obie expresses this sentiment:

It is important that you be heard and that what you have to say is taken into consideration when the final decision is made regarding the matter. From that standpoint it's [being part of a Circle] been helpful... to make a contribution that hopefully is a positive contribution although sometimes you need to get in there and just raise hell and I've been know to do that and that in and of itself causes some other things to happen which are good for the most part.

The Circles provide a forum for the women to develop their own voices and provide support to one another as they go out in the community sharing their voices.

#### *Engagement in Community*

Engagement in community results from the cumulative affect of participation in the Circles of Hope process and personal growth and development. It is through engagement in the community that these women are able to effect community change. In this part of the chapter some of the common factors affecting community engagement include bridging to others, representing, connecting people to their passions, and engagement.

*Bridging to others.* WomanSpirit is engaged in several networks of including the National Congress of Neighborhood Women (NCNW) and Grass Roots Organizations Operating Together in Sisterhood (GROOTS International). Active participation in these networks have exposed the women in the Circles to a wide variety of perspectives that they otherwise would not have experienced, offered them the opportunity to engage in dialogues with important leaders from around the world who are shaping the future of gender-based development including world leaders such as Wangari Maathai, founder of the Greenbelt Movement in Kenya and 2004 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Monika

Jaeckel, founder of the German Mothers Center Movement, and Sangetha Puroshthaman of the Rural Women's Network in India. Gene effectively expressed her appreciation for these opportunities.

I have never been helpful outside my little Circle...friends and family. I never ventured too much outside that Circle. Being over here...all kinds of groups of people come over here...and I have connected with many people outside my own Circle that I wouldn't have otherwise.

Each of the women I interviewed spoke of the importance of these and other exchanges. They expressed feeling part of something larger than themselves. Some of the women in the Circles have traveled and exposed themselves to different cultures and perspectives on development. Obie was able to walk the halls of the United Nations during an exchange in New York with the National Congress of Neighborhood Women. These networks have the effect of not only changing how they do things in their own Circles and communities but helps them understand how what they do in their community is important to others and contributes to the development efforts of other grassroots women around the world.

The importance of bridging relationships goes beyond the sharing of different perspectives and finding common ground on which to build relationships. Building bridges has also been a means of extending systems of support to one another. These systems of support are constructed through peer exchanges which are essentially Circles conducted with sister organizations around the country and different parts of the world. All of the participants expressed an appreciation and strong value for the peer exchanges. Bridging to others is an extension of the diversity sub-theme but extends beyond the sharing of perspectives which was the focus regarding diversity. These relationships are developed in a systematic and purposeful way with the aim of contributing to a global network of sister organizations that are sharing perspectives,

best practices, and policy agendas. Several of the concepts that Debbie articulated in her stories were an extension of the exchanges she had the opportunity to experience.

Sometimes peer exchanges are opportunities for developing personal relationships with people from other parts of the world who have created community change on a scale much larger than what they many of the women in the Circles have had the chance to do. Elizabeth taps into this when she talks about her experiences with Dr. Wangari Maathai. Elizabeth was so excited that someone of Dr. Maathai's stature would take the time to get to know her personally. It legitimized to some extent her own work and so when Elizabeth received a little extra support from that exchange in the form of acknowledgment as a peer from Dr. Maathai, it added a little more legitimacy for her work with other collaborators in her community.

Wangari, you know she made me a bracelet. I mean you know I sold bracelets for her. I mean nobody believes I mean, I carried her bags, I mean as soon as she won the big prize [Nobel Peace Prize] I kept telling everybody I know her and they say oh girl, you don't know her. I said I do know her, here's one thing she made for me. Here's my picture, I have a picture of her from when we had the dinner and everything. Yeah, I was telling everybody say see, I told you all.

Gene had a similar story when she talked about her connection to Monika Jaeckel. Monika is the founder of a large European movement called the German Mothers Centers. There are 800 of them worldwide. WomanSpirit has been networked with them for several years and Monika has been to St. Louis several times and participated in Circles with WomanSpirit. Gene talked a little bit about how she was able to connect with Monika on one of her visits. Apparently Monika had a reputation for being kind of quiet in the group and Gene was proud that she could get her to talk with her.



We just had a ball. They said Monika don't talk to nobody. Monika talked to me the whole time she was here. You all say Monika don't talk but I would go out to the hotel to pick her up and she'd talk...I told her I am going to be over in Germany. I did get to see her the next time she came too.

These are relatively simple outcomes but important because the opportunity to connect with someone on a personal level like a Monika Jaeckel or Wangari Maathai, people who are accomplished community change agents recognized around the world is an important form of support and encouragement that these women are then able to leverage in their work in Circles and their community. It serves as a source of inspiration when things are not going as well as they would like. The relationship with the German Mothers Centers has yielded numerous exchanges, projects, and opportunities for these types of connections.

*Representing.* Representing is the process of extending the Circle into the community. It is the concept that when a member of a Circle goes out into the community to participate in an event or work with another organization that the Circle is interested in supporting then they are actually "representing" the Circle. Responsibility is implied when someone represents and so is support. Whoever is representing has the responsibility to be the face of the Circle. They represent the principles and values of the Circle and its reputation. In return they receive the support of a group and organization when they are out representing. The support of the group provides reassurance to the person who represents that they are not alone, that others in the Circle share some of the same perspectives, values and beliefs on the issue because they have discussed these things in the Circle. Obie talked about representing most directly when she said:

It [representing] allows me to have...the force and the strength of an organization with me or supporting me as I go out, or go about what I am doing. Where are you from? Imani Family Center, ok. Out in the community now some folks say, ah, 'well you know Imani [Imani Family Center] represents', meaning we show up and that's important.

The others also talked about representing. Danielle is representing when she is working with the church trying to set up a youth program. She is relying on the support of the Circle to make her project happen figuratively and literally. Danielle receives counsel from the Circle on her project and she is also counting on the Circle to help set up new Circles at the church for the youth group and the women in the church. The assurance that the Circle is there to provide support makes it possible for her to take on the project.

It was similar for Aeshe when she was discussing her work as a facilitator for OASIS and other groups. When she talked about being credentialed by WomanSpirit she was essentially stating she was representing when she worked working with another group because she was letting that group know she is affiliated with WomanSpirit and has been trained in the process. The support of the Circle and served as a form of credibility for Aeshe because she believed the Circle supported her work with the groups that she facilitated.

Representing plays an important role for the women as they engaged in community because served as a way of extending the support system that they received when they were in the Circle into the community. Extending the support system beyond the Circle makes it possible for people to try new things and seek out different relationships and experiences. The organization and the Circle benefited because they extended their network and influence further out into the community.

*Connecting people to their passions.* The women interviewed in this study are very passionate about the things they have chosen to do in their communities. The projects were sometimes extension of their work such as Gene's work in her neighborhood. She was engaged in housing issues and she worked with real estate for the City of St. Louis. She was passionate about her work in real estate, and so it was natural for her to extend herself into the community on issues of housing. The same holds true for Debbie. She mentioned several times that she was passionate about addressing issues of poverty and she actually worked for an advocacy organization that was trying to affect policy change that would improve healthcare access for the poor.

Makeda is passionate about the Circles of Hope process and she has given it the past 11 years of her life.

This is my life work and it didn't necessarily come with a lot of income.

So that my life outside WomanSpirit kind of blended into everything kind of rolling around and being around here including me living in the center itself, giving up my house, selling my momma's house, all of those things helped to sever my independence from this process and made my life and my work almost the same so that's one big piece for me.

She is so passionate about her work with the process that she has, in effect, stopped doing anything else with her life. It has cost her because sometimes she would like a little separation from the work and from the process but since she lives at the Imani Family Center, there is no where to go to get some distance from the work unless she travels somewhere else on a vacation.

Elizabeth was passionate about learning of all kinds, and she has focused much of her energy in the community on helping others learn or gain access to education. This passion was fueled in part because education was denied to her when she was younger

but also because the process has inspired her to get involved. Danielle was motivated by a desire to make a difference and she had a passion for working with young people.

It was important for these women to be passionate about whatever it was they chose to do because they did not have a lot of financial resources to work with as they pursued their passions. They had to rely heavily on their passion and the commitment and support of the Circle to provide the fuel they needed to keep going. Of the seven women interviewed only one actually got paid to do their work in the community. The rest were all volunteers. If passion was measured by the things they were able to accomplish, they had lots of it.

*Engagement.* Several of the women voiced that engagement was an important role for them to play in the community. Obie said, "It [being engaged] means that you're involved, that you're...that you can be seen, that you participate in the community in whatever way is comfortable or best for you." Most of the other women expressed a similar sentiment. Gene described it as "getting into the grassroots of problems" and she has become much more of an activist in her community working with her Alderman and sometime challenging the status quo. Makeda talked about engagement as making a contribution.

When I go into the broader community or society I know that I have something to contribute and I know that I have something of value to contribute. I know that people pay me to give the information, they send for me to come from all over the world...So the fact that it [Circles of Hope] has worked, that we've documented it in International meetings, that we've documented it locally and regionally, that St. Louis University has evaluated it. I am confident and sure that what we are doing is something that has value. Not just in my opinion but in the opinion of many, many people who have participated in and evaluated our work.

The reinforcement that Makeda has received from those she's had a chance to work with has reinforced her confidence that her contributions matter and make a difference for people.

Aeshe described engagement as more of a give and take "...it [the Circle] keeps me reaching out and outreaching, meaning, I will extend myself to people and then when they extend themselves to me I am able to do something." This is a measured response to engagement but is also based in an understanding that not all engagement is good. Sometimes potential partners or collaborators offered her opportunities that were not good for her. Since Aeshe had few resources she had to be careful about when she got engaged. She did not want to commit to projects that would cost her too much in terms of time, energy, or money so she had to say no.

Debbie's perspective was a little different. She was engaged in community change professionally. However, what she had been able to because of her affiliation with the Circle was become an advocate for engaging others, the public specifically, in public policy dialogues and she talked about this in regard to engaging the public in the debate on cuts to Medicaid.

I think I was successful at introducing public opinion as a component of that discussion because previous to that time they really hadn't engaged the public...once you start getting a topic out it's like zeitgeist, I mean people start hearing about it and then they start thinking about it and then pretty soon their input has become very important.

All seven of the women have been engaged in developing their communities. Some by working directly on specific agendas in their neighborhood and others, like Debbie, were working on getting others in the community more engaged.

### *Conclusion*

One constant that the cases all share in common that has not been discussed yet is the relationship between Makeda and the other participants. All the participants began their interviews by talking about how they came to be associated with Makeda. The process was primarily her vision and creation so that is natural. In addition, the other women in the study all mentioned her skills as a facilitator and her ability to work the process so it is difficult to separate her from the process and the participants' personal development and subsequent engagement in their communities.

I think it has been made clear that there is a strong relationship between participation in the Circles of Hope process and personal change and growth. In several instances the participants directly attributed changes they have made in their lives to the Circles of Hope. Elizabeth believes the Circles helped her realize that she could go to school and she went and learned about computers. Danielle developed a broader more diverse perspective on the world that helped her learn that if she believes she can make a difference she needs to do so and to not let barriers stop her. Debbie credited the Circle changing her views on the importance of getting people involved in policy development resulting in a change how she approached her advocacy work. Gene discovered how important local government was to her community and became involved in her Ward Politics. These are all changes they made in their lives because of their affiliation with the Circles of Hope.

It is also clear that there is a direct relationship between the changes the women were able to make in their lives and their capacity for being agents of change in their community. Elizabeth used her skills in computers to start her own computer course at the Center and her rediscovered passion for education led to her begin a program at her church helping young people learn how to negotiate the process of getting into college. Debbie has applied her new understanding of how public policy is formed to focus on

engaging more people in public policy dialogues and her appreciation of difference has helped her engage in discussions with groups who have opposing points of view.

Danielle is challenging convention by working at a church where she's not a member because she believes she can make a difference and she has the resources to do it.

Gene has engaged in local Ward politics actually helping replace an alderman who she did not believe was good for the neighborhood. She has also lobbied against proposed changes in the law that would negatively affect some of her neighbors even though she is an employee of the City and there may be economic risks associated with that kind of activity.

Chapter six builds on the factors presented in this chapter by beginning the process of constructing a model for creating community change using the experiences of the Circle of Hope as a template for creating personal change and growth that may result in people becoming more engaged in their communities as agents of change.

## Chapter Six Model for Community Change

The stories of the seven women as they were presented in chapter four and analyzed in chapter five make a compelling case for the continued development of the Circles of Hope process as a model for creating community change. Chapter six begins the process of developing a model for creating community change based on their experiences.

Using grounded theory as the framework for developing the model, the experiences of the women serve as the primary data that informs the development of the theory in the model (Corbin and Strauss, 1998). Appendix D provides a summary of the themes associated with each of the participants. The model combines elements of the process, the findings in chapter four, and the current literature as summarized in chapter two. The model is divided into three stages with each stage building on the previous one. The stages include: the process experience, personal growth and change, and engagement in the community. The process experience is the first stage. It examines how the model works by looking at the characteristics of the Circles of Hope that contribute to personal growth and change and engaging in community. Characteristics include the elements of the process, the environment, and individual and collective capacity.

The second stage is personal growth and change. In this part of the model I revisit the elements of personal growth and change that were described in chapter five. The model considers how they work together to increase a person's capacity for engaging in the community. Characteristics of personal growth and change include focus, a changing worldview, risk taking, exploring identity, and developing voice.

The third stage is engagement in the community. This stage explores how the process experience and personal growth and change contribute to the development of a



person's capacity to create change in the community. The four characteristics of engaging in the community include bridging to others, representing, connecting people to their passions and engagement will be developed as core outcomes of the intersection of the process experience and the personal growth and change that contribute to the development a of a person's capacity to create change in community.

*The Circles of Hope Process Experience*

The Circles of Hope is a gender-based development process. Makeda calls it "women's ways of being together"; it was created by women, for women to use by women in their own development. The three characteristics that contribute to its success as a development process work in tandem to create an experience that provides a foundation for creating personal and community change and serve as the primary building block for theory development (Corbin & Strauss, 1998). As figure 1 indicates, these characteristics include the process elements, the environment created by the Circle, and the individual and collective capacity of people to participate in their own development.

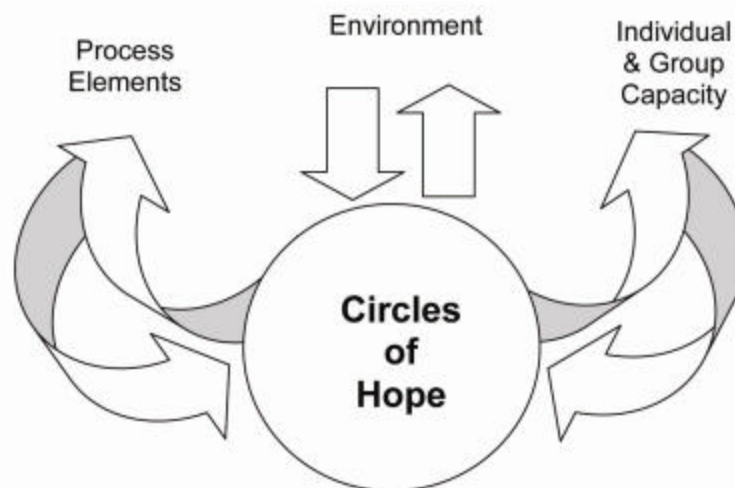


Figure 1. Circles of Hope: Primary characteristics that contribute to its potential for creating personal change and growth and increased engagement in community.

The Circles of Hope process is bi-relational in that the process characteristics are shaped by the process itself and the Circles of Hope evolves as the characteristics of the process are developed and utilized. For example, the Circles of Peace is a program that Makeda started with a group of residents at an area school. Initially their Circle was pretty basic because they had very little experience with individual or collective decision-making. Over the first 18 months of the Circles of Peace the process evolved as the participants developed and became more sophisticated in their ability to participate in the Circle. They were able to modify the process to meet their needs; as their needs were met and their capacity to more fully participate improved their personal development goals become more attainable.

#### *Process Elements*

A Circle consists of three elements: social support, education for action, and organizing for change. The process is a facilitated discussion among people with common concerns. The dialogue begins with a discussion of what is going well with each of the people in the group. The sharing allows the participants to move from the place of being victims to identifying the strengths they have so that they can begin to build a program that utilizes the resources they have at their disposal (Payne, 1998). This part of the Circle allows the group to develop relationships based on their common experiences. Experiences that illustrate their ability to address and solve many of their own problems rather than building relationships that illustrate their inability to manage or cope with the realities they face.

The second element in a Circle is a discussion of current challenges. What are the issues that keep people where we are? How have the members of the Circle participated in their own underdevelopment? What resources are available to help them work through these issues? This is the educational element of the process. These questions are answered using popular education methods such as incorporating music

and cultural elements into the learning experience. These techniques facilitate the participant interaction and sharing such that they learn from each others experiences and perspectives. Service providers, University faculty, and other resources may be included as needed to answer questions and provide information that can assist with decision making and problem solving. A key value is for the Circle to remain in control of their learning.

The third phase of the process is personal or collective action. In the Circle the question is asked, what support might make a difference? Using information from the educational dialogue from the Circle and creating links to identified community resources participants develop their own plans and act on those plans together in order to advocate and change the circumstances that limit their development.

One of the unique aspects of the Circles of Hope is how the three elements work together. A group of educators is likely to focus on the educational aspect of a Circle, social workers will focus on the social support, and community organizers and developers will tend focus on the change, such as the outcomes the process might produce? What is extremely valuable about the Circles of Hope is all three are integrated in this process and valued equally. The education component helps people understand the issues and their effect on the participants in the Circle individually and collectively. It helps them name issues and explore the root causes. Social support makes it possible for women to participate and creates a sense of the collective “we” for women who are socially isolated. Social support encourages women to try new things, take measured risks and apply what they learn. Organizing for change helps people become engaged.

*Social support.* Social support is a means to help women break down social isolation. Makeda described the women she works with in her Circles as being isolated because of their gender, geography and/or their disabilities. Any one of these factors

can isolate them and of the seven women who participated in this study all have experienced at least two of these challenges while six have experienced all three. Personal support can take many forms in a Circle but there are three common elements whose importance were reinforced in the case study interviews, vision and values, basic agreements, and leadership support.

The Circle starts with values and vision (NCNW, 1993; Payne-Bell 1998). A Circle begins by exploring the values the women share in the Circle through vision questions. Open-ended vision questions help participants begin to explore their experiences in ways that help them think about what they want for the future. What do they value about themselves and their potential? It is a way for women to begin to think about what is important to them and how they might go about putting things in place to begin to create that vision for themselves (NCNW).

Vision questions contradict resignation, self-defeating patterns, and the status quo. We want people to imagine a future that has not yet arrived.

We plan them so they are appropriate to the situation and the participants. For example, a vision question may ask, what is the purpose of this group? (Payne & Jeanetta, 2006, p.23)

Vision also includes how communities begin to build collective identities around what they share in common (NCRCD, 2000). Linking vision to values helps people find common ground. Values are a reflection of what is important to them now both in terms of the things they want for themselves as well as the things they like about who they are that they want to preserve and respect.

Values are important to most people but groups that are marginalized by the broader society often prefer to learn with others that share similar values and views about the broader society (DeArrudah, 1995). One of the things that happen in a Circle is that views and perspectives of the participants on values emerge as they discuss their

vision for what they want for themselves. Their work together typically focuses on those values they share in common.

Vision reflects what people want for their future. Vision and values together are the basis for establishing common ground (Jeanetta, Stallmann, Leuci, & Adams, 2005). When a group starts with values and vision they are building a foundation for establishing common ground amongst each other; this will support them as part of the group when they venture into the broader community (NCNW, 1993, Payne, 1998).

The basic agreements are the ground rules governing how the participants in a Circle will participate in the process and are based on the values and vision. They tend to set the standards and carry values and vision into the community (Payne, 1996). The basic agreements are the basic codes of behavior that help participants develop a culture of acting. They provide a set of ground rules tied to the collective values of the participants in a Circle and are foundational for being able to work together. Basic agreements used by the Circles of Hope include things like respectful listening, no speaking a second time until everyone has had an opportunity to speak once, time limits, to name a few. They also help participants develop expectations about their own behavior and that of the rest of the group that enhance the development of trust within the group.

The aim of our basic agreements is to find the simplest and clearest ways to remind ourselves of our mission, our values, our hopes, our goals, our standards of behavior, and our time limitations. With basic agreements we don't have to reinvent a safe and thoughtful way of having a meeting every time. We always start from our standards, from what we believe in. (NCNW, 1993, p.39)

Leadership support is the process of developing leadership capacity by supporting each other as leaders. The Circle is a peer learning process that relies on

the participants playing key leadership roles. Within each Circle there are opportunities for the women to practice their own leadership by playing *facilitative roles* such as facilitator, time keeper, or recorder, or *organizing roles* such as recruiter and transporter, or *hosting roles* such as greeter and server. The Circle is a place where support is offered and skills are developed to be able to offer support and provide leadership on one's own behalf and on behalf of one's community (Payne, 1996).

Leadership support is also about tapping into the skills that are already present in each person. Some participants come with technical skills they received in school or work and others come with skills based on their life experiences. The Circle provides opportunities for people to explore the gifts they have and apply them in a manner of their choosing. Aeshe talked about this as being active and finding opportunities to contribute.

Leadership support operates from the paradigm that everyone has gifts to offer; some of these gifts are latent and just need to be cultivated and others are all ready to go but need an opportunity for expression. This is a form of asset-based development where communities of people are working towards building assets that increase the quality of life of the people. In this case the assets are the gifts and capabilities of the people in the Circle (Kretzman & McKnight, 1993).

Personal support is core to the Circles of Hope process. The women in this community are engaged in their own development. The personal support makes it possible for them to meet the demands of life on a daily basis and still focus on creating a better future for themselves and their families.

*Education for action.* Education for action is the second principle element of the Circle that contributes to the process. The education aspect of the Circle draws heavily on the popular education techniques pioneered by Jane Vella at the Jubilee Institute and *Training for Transformation: A Handbook for Community Workers (1995, V 1 & 2)*, by

Ann Hope and Sally Timmel. The Circle incorporated principles from Vella's work such as keeping presentations centered on the learners, being open and flexible to changes from the group, relating educational materials to the experience and culture of the group, incorporating interactive practices such as case studies, skits, role plays, model building, and letting learners present parts of the material where they have appropriate knowledge or expertise (Vella, 1994, 1997).

Hope and Timmel (1995) ground much of their work in applying the principles of Paulo Freire's work to addressing social issues in Africa. The learning is dialogic and is the work is usually completed in small groups using participatory meeting practices that engage people in dialogue with each other about the topic and use things like music, art, literature, film, dance, to illustrate or explain. The emphasis is on engaging people in an exploration of a topic.

The Circles of Hope is a way of learning designed to help women create change in their own lives and become engaged in creating community change. It links personal change to community change in much the same way as Paulo Friere (1971) described conscientização (consciousness raising). Friere's concept of conscientização was of a learning process that helped people better understand the world they lived in and the problems that impeded their own development and emancipation, identify the social conventions in their communities and the society at large that oppressed them, and moved them to create change in the systems that are causing the oppression. Learning that contributes to this understanding makes social change possible.

The Circles of Hope process is in-line with Friere's concept of conscientização in that it is analytical. Problems are analyzed from a personal, community and societal level so it becomes possible to understand the problem as a local manifestation of a larger community or societal issue. The tendency for most people is to select a frame of reference that is very personal. For example, if a woman loses her health insurance she

may be inclined to believe that it is because she did not earn enough money. Her shortage of income is because she was not able to get a good job. Good jobs were not available to her because she was not able to finish college because she did not have enough financial support to go to school.

When a personal frame of reference is selected then it is easier for the person to look internally at the causes of her misfortune. Is it because of the poor choices she made or because she is a victim of circumstances beyond her control? When the problem is analyzed from a broader social context, then the frame of reference changes and so do the conclusions and potential responses. If the same woman looks at her lack of healthcare access from a broader community perspective, she may see factors such as rising costs that pushed her employer out of the market, declining public support for insurance to low-income women, and a dominant culture that places a higher value on being self-sufficient than it does on making sure that all basic human needs are met. This approach to learning is what some would describe as a liberating model of adult education by stressing the issues and disparities that exist in communities and link educational activities with social change (Brookfield, 1985; Cirillo, 2000; Healy, 1996; King, 1989; Young & Padilla, 1990).

When Makeda described her experiences with changes in healthcare she described a situation where she was looking at how she could get her needs met but she also was analytical in terms of how social changes were driving the process, not some failure on her part. She is still responsible for getting her healthcare needs met as best she can but she did not blame herself for the situation and she was looking forward to seeing how she could get her needs met and help her Circle better understand and prepare for additional changes that may come down the road.

The Circles of Hope education process helps the women in the Circle look at things more broadly so that they can act on their own behalf and not be held down by



their own perceptions of inadequacy triggered by something out of their direct control and that translates into their work with others. Elizabeth described her own teaching approach as helping “her guys” learn to use computers. What she was actually doing was helping them with life skills. When she discussed their success, she talked about how they were employed, living in housing, reconnecting with families, and continuing their own development. She never mentioned what she taught them to do with the computer. The women in the Circles take a development approach to learning in that the learning is tied directly to development issues in their community (Moore & Brooks, 1996). They are engaged in the development of their learning and the Circle defines to a great extent how they participate (Corson, 1998).

*Planning and organizing for change.* The third element of the Circle is organizing for change. The Circle incorporates planning into the process so that the women can begin to identify and implement action strategies. The Circles of Hope incorporates a capacity-based approach to planning where the focus is to build on strengths, capacities and assets (Kretzman & McKnight, 1993). This approach to planning engages women in creating their own futures. Sometimes the horizon is short term, maybe two or three meetings away, and other times it may be long term and includes addressing individual needs. Some planning takes place in every Circle. The last question is usually a planning question designed to help the women in the Circle think about an action they can take.

One of the goals of planning and organizing to change is to help the women in the Circle begin to think about and take actions on their own behalf. In *The Careless Society* (1995), John Kretzman documents how society has focused almost exclusively on the delivery of services as a way of dealing with social issues. Social services have been built almost exclusively on an expert, client-based model where the resources are concentrated in the provision of services and few resources have been focused on

building capacities. The Circle takes a capacity-building approach to action planning so the focus is on the actions they can take to make a difference in their own lives. The actions may include learning more about the various services available to them but a key value tied to the actions is staying in control of their own development.

Organizing for change is a way of figuring out how to use what is learned in the education-for-action part of the Circle, but also includes connecting the actions they take to the vision they have for the future. This type of community-action planning focuses on creating a desired vision for the future and working backwards from that vision to define the actions that need to take place today that will lead to a realization of the vision (Green & Haines, 2003). Connecting to the vision is also a way to begin to measure progress. Once the vision is established it becomes possible to set some simple benchmarks and use them for measuring progress towards the kind of change that is desired. Benchmarks also serve as a means of identifying where there might be a need for additional learning.

### *Environment*

The environment includes the place and the people. WomanSpirit opened the Imani Family Center, because in their community there were no public places for women to gather and work on issues important to them. In the interviews they described it as a safe place where they feel comfortable, relaxed, spiritual, and rejuvenated. The place is a reflection of them and the work they do there. The people also contribute to the environment. One aspect that came up again and again was the diversity of the people who were part of the Circles.

*Importance of Place.* It is difficult to underestimate the importance of place to community building. In this study Danielle was able to translate her learning into youth programs, Elizabeth in education programs at the Imani Center, and Aeshe into support for Circles in other parts of the community. They took responsibility for taking what they

learned and found ways to apply that learning in their community. The place is an important ingredient because it reinforces their learning and provides a base for trying out the things they want to do for their community. Community-based education programs need to build autonomy if they are going to stand the test of time (Vacarro, 1990).

One of the things that a shared space has done is given the women a common identity and place where they can make their own rules. The process elements provide the capacity for developing the rules but they are visualized in the place. When people go to the Imani Family Center they know it is a little different from other places they might visit. It looks different, it feels different and the rules are different. It is very welcoming which is one of the reasons it attracts such a diversity of people but it is also connected to the identity of the women who participate in the programs at the Imani Center everyday. They often use the Circle and Imani Family Center interchangeably because they have created such an attachment to the place and it has become a symbol of the work that they have done there in their Circles.

Stein and Imel (2002) discussed the importance of place to community-based learning and noted that the place should foster neutrality among members so they all feel some ownership in the place, the learning relates to people daily life and daily concerns, knowledge is locally produced, and community may gain power and privileges that come with homogeneity because the focus is on what people share. All these traits are evidenced in the learning at Imani. The place is a literal reflection of the people. The symbols, the furnishings, the garden, the atmosphere all reinforce the principles of the organization and contribute to making it a safe place for learning. Gene in her interview talked about the place having a healing effect on her in that she can come in the door feeling down but always feels better when she leaved. Elizabeth talked about how they always have to push people out of the door when the programs are done. The

place has become an extension of the support system for people not unlike other community-education programs that place great importance on the place (Cirillo, 2000; Laux & Kolinska, 2004; Puroshothaman, 1998).

*Public space for women.* The women in this study make a case for more public spaces for women. They had a number of accomplishments with few resources. The Imani Center is a women's center and the issues of women are at the center of the agenda on a daily basis and there are even fewer places where low-income women of color are able to learn and reflect on their lives. Community-based education programs in marginalized communities strive to cultivate their culture, define their own learning needs, and set their own development agenda (Young & Padilla, 1990). This is what they do in the Circle and the stories of the women have borne this out. The place is where their culture is preserved and developed. Most of the women come and go but their culture and identity as a group is preserved in the place. The Circle is where their culture and identity is developed. When they work together as a Circle they develop an identity as a group that reflects the norms and values of the participants. The place, because it plays a central role in the process is part of the culture and identity that emerge from the work of the Circle.

Normally when we talk about place and community-based education we are thinking about places like schools, public meeting rooms, and other "neutral" sites in the community where diverse groups of people can meet and pursue their learning. What is problematic is that most of these places are owned by the public and often the agenda of community-based learning programs like the Circles of Hope is social change. They are trying to respond to structural issues in society (Fettes, 1999). This is particularly problematic if the group happens to be marginalized in society. For example, they are not likely to feel safe or comfortable meeting at the public school if they are advocating for change in an education system that does not work for them because it does not meet

their needs or reflect the values and principles important to them. New places, often outside the normal public facilities, may be necessary for them to be effective (Corson, 1998). In the case of WomanSpirit there were few public places for anyone to meet so the Imani Family Center also plays a larger community serving role in that others in the community will use the space for their public meetings and purposes beyond the work of the Circle.

What became clear in the stories the women shared was the place was important to them and I think that contributed to their learning and capacity for creating change in the community. They are not alone in this experience. The German Mothers Centers have founded a movement based on creating public space for women and while each center is a little different (there are more than 800 worldwide) they all have some common characteristics including a public living room, coffee shop, second hand store, day care, and working space that reflect the special needs of mothers. They have documented their work and received recognition for their efforts (Laux & Kolinska, 2004). The Mothers Centers have become a source of social change in their neighborhoods and communities and their network is active in shaping international policies for women. Public places for women give them the opportunity to play a role in shaping public policy based on women's ways of knowing and doing things because it is their space; reflecting the norms, sensibilities and needs of women. Public spaces for women make their participation possible and the place is where they participate.

*Diversity.* There are two elements of diversity that really emerged from the interviews. One was the high value they placed on having diverse groups of women in the Circle and the other was their ability to use the Circle to find commonality as women. The Circle is comprised primarily of African American women that are trying to address some of the societal issues that are working against their development and they identify with some of the forces that black feminists and womanists are concerned about such as

the intersection of race, class, gender, and income (Feifer & Maher, 2003). What they are able to do is create an environment where those issues are explored within the context of the women's individual development and the focus is where they feel they can make a contribution.

Many of the issues that the Circle deals with over time are issues that affect people differently. Healthcare is an issue for many people from a wide variety of backgrounds. In order to really understand the issues around healthcare people who have a wide variety of experiences in dealing with the healthcare system need to learn how to share their experiences with one another if they are going to have any success in understanding the issue well enough to develop an appropriate response. This works for large and small scale issues.

The Circles of Hope values the diversity of perspectives that come through the door and this is reflected in the types of outcomes they were able to achieve. All of the women in this study attributed some of the most important lessons they learned to the experiences they had with the diverse groups of people. These experiences opened up their perspectives to different ways of seeing the world and at the same time it affirmed some of their core values about what they shared.

Through the dialogues the women were not only receiving different perspectives on the issues, they were also discovering where they had common ground. They were able to build common identities as women around issues that they held in common and they were able to share their perspectives on being low income African American women in the broader American culture (hooks, 1990).

The two empowerment theories of feminism that relate specifically to concerns of African American women are black feminism and the womanism. Both are relevant to the work the women do in the Circle. One view of black feminism is that personal stories are used to talk about what it means to be black women living in a society where being

African American is defined by African American men and being a woman is defined by predominantly white, middle class women (Hill-Collins, 2000). The Circle is a place where they are able to explore their identities and the sharing of personal stories an important part of that process. What the diversity of the Circle has made possible is the opportunity for the women to develop their voice, shape their identities, address issues, and share their stories with other women, sometimes from very different places and experiences. Makeda noted that the diversity of experiences with women helped them:

Define feminism for ourselves in ways that resonated for us not excluding us as mothers and deliberately included culture, spirituality, and concerns about the environmental as an organizing practice.

This perspective on feminism tends to be similar to that of some like bell hooks (2000) who advocates for creating space within feminism to deal with multiple issues of identity. However, the focus of the women in the Circle is on development and most of the black feminists studies in this project are not engaged in issues of development focusing instead on issues of social equality. While that is an important part of the work they do in a Circle, they are very concerned about how issues of difference play out in developmental terms such as poverty, access to healthcare, quality education, and housing. These are grassroots development issues that the mainstream feminist movements have not addressed in ways that these grassroots women can identify with. The black feminists or womanist empowerment theories have not fully addressed development issues either. WomanSpirit has instead affiliated with national and international women's organizations that are focused on the development issues of grassroots women. The Circle is a feminist approach to development that is built around asserting their multiple identities as women and constructing multi-faceted approaches to addressing issues around their commonalities.

*Individual and Collective Capacity*

This theme is built around basic development issues affecting an individual's capacity to effectively participate in the Circle. The Circles of Hope is a fairly simple process that is developmental both individually and collectively. There are two principle assumptions we will explore in this section. The first is faith. The women in the Circle have a great deal of faith in each other, their spirituality, their god, and their process. The other assumption is the capacity to develop trusting relationships. This has a tremendous impact on what they are able to accomplish. It takes a great deal of trust in the process, the support of peers, and the Circle in order to become engaged in addressing community issues. If one does not have the capacity to enter into trusting relationships it is difficult to make the process work.

*Faith, believing change is possible.* Makeda talked about faith and its role in the work they do at the Imani Family Center in the Circles of Hope.

Imani, the name of our family center, means "faith" in Swahili, and is our most basic value: Imani...to believe with all our hearts in God and show respect for one another, to stand in unity, resisting all forms of exploitation and oppression. WomanSpirit's work is guided by the principle that the revitalization of communities begins with the empowerment of individuals and families. We define empowerment as 'the ability to be self-directed, self-determining and self-sufficient'.

The women in the Circle represent a strong faith community and this manifests itself in the values, culture and spirituality of their work. Much of the work comes from their faith. Faith is a means of cultivating hope and hope helps one struggle to create change (Freire, 1994). Hope and struggle are two sides of the same coin. Hope cultivates the belief that change is possible and motivates people to continue the struggle and the flip side is that struggling and working towards change cultivates hope



(Freire). Several of the women talked about their faith and its importance to their work. In some respects when the work they do is a means of honoring their faith.

Faith also manifests itself in how they approach the work. They operate their program on very limited resources. The buildings are paid for but there are expenses every month that they often do not have the income to pay. They operate the program out of the kindness and generosity of others, commitment of their own resources, and occasional grants and contracts (Jeanetta, 2005). Their program has not had much success in attracting any support that would provide resource stability. Consequently they have many months where they do not know at the beginning of the month whether or not they will have the resources to keep the doors open at the end of the month. It is faith that keeps them going. They believe that if they keep working hard and trust in God, themselves, and the people they work with that they will be able to continue their work. This is how they are able to with so much uncertainty.

One challenge for a program like the Circles of Hope or any other dialogue process is how to cultivate or translate faith into the capacity to make change happen especially when there is an absence of faith. One of the Circles discussed by a couple of the women is a project at an elementary school that has had lots of problems called the Circles of Peace. At one point the death of a child motivated a group of people to look at ways they could work with parents to get them more involved in the school as part of a peace team. WomanSpirit participated in this project by working with the group to establish a Circle.

The Circle has met for 18 months and is just getting to the point where they can really begin to talk about their original purpose which was to establish peace teams at the school so they can make it a safe place for children to learn. Before they could actually participate in conflict resolution on the peace teams they had to cultivate some of the same skills in themselves they want to see in the children before they could be a

resource to the children and teachers. They literally had to learn basic concepts of working with others, participating in dialogues, working with ground rules and exploring core values and concepts so they could model for themselves the values they wanted to instill in the young people. Key to the growth of this group has been the cultivation of the idea that they can actually make a difference. They need to believe that their work will make a difference. For those who have had little history or experience in programs that made a difference in their own lives or the lives of others it can take a long time to cultivate a belief system that acknowledges positive change is possible. Faith plays a strong role in cultivating that belief system.

*Trust.* Learning to trust others and being trustworthy itself is another core value that emerges as an important competency. Individually the women in the Circle need to trust themselves. They need to believe they have the resources necessary to make changes for themselves and their community. The Circle cultivates this type of trust through the exploration of values and the opportunities to voice what they believe about the issues impacting their lives. They do this through the expression of their voices. They also need to develop trusting relationships with other people and groups based on shared culture, values, and commitment to the well-being of the group. It is an essential ingredient in the formation of community and can be traced back to the work of Tönnies (1887/1957). He believed that communities needed shared ownership of relationships and that was the basic building block of community. It is an assumption that is still important today in a number of contexts—particularly in places where there is lots of isolation. Connecting people to one another and building on shared values is a way to help people become engaged and is core to a number of approaches to community-based education models (DeArrudah, 1995; King, 1989; McGaughy, 2000).

One reason the Circles of Hope is an effective mode for community-based education is because of its capacity for building shared values. One of the core values

of the Circles of Hope is the concept of principled partnerships. They work with other organizations that share similar values and principles. They do this not as a way to exclude others, but to ensure that the values that are important to them are present in their relationships with others. Relationships based on shared values and principles help to build relationships of trust (Littrell, et al., 1992).

### Personal Growth and Change

Personal growth and change is the second part of the model. Grounded theory places emphasis on building a theory based on what is discovered during the research (Corbin & Strauss, 1998). This part of the model is based on analysis of stories the women shared and relates to the types of changes they attributed to participation in the process. Personal growth and change is based on the analysis of the stories and focuses on changes they reported and attributed to participation in the process.

In the stories the women shared in the interviews there were many examples of how the women's participation in the Circles of Hope contributed to their personal growth and change. Each of the women shared stories of how they were able to create change for themselves due to their participation in the Circles of Hope. Danielle attributed her participation the Circle to an increased tolerance of those with different values and experiences. Debbie attributed her involvement in the Circles to a broader view of the world. Aeshe learned how to simplify her life. The support of the Circle has made it possible for Obie to be focused and enable her to make contributions to the Circle. Gene is not as harsh on herself and the others in her life. Elizabeth went back to school. Makeda has learned how to use the support of the Circle to develop her own leadership.

Figure 2 illustrates the relationship between the Circle and the personal change and growth of each individual. The model is bi-directional. As members of the Circle they are affected by and have an affect on the process, the environment, and the individual and collective capacities of the Circle. The learning and development that

occurs in the Circle contribute to personal growth and change and the personal growth and change contribute to the development of the Circle. The process continues to evolve as the women develop and the model tries to capture this dynamic. Based on the experience of the women in this study, the types of personal growth and change include focus, risk taking, developing voice, exploring identities, and changing worldview.

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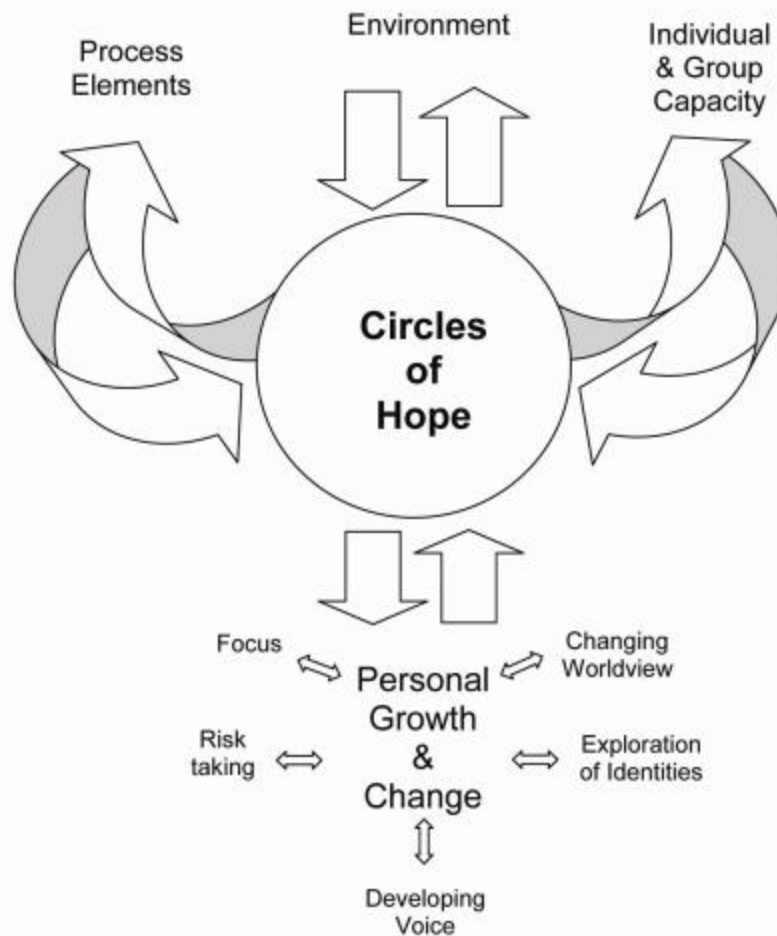


Figure 2. Relationship between personal change and growth and the Circles of Hope.

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### *Focus*

The Circles of Hope helps the participants find focus so they are better able to concentrate on those things they are able to change for themselves. Virtually all the

women mentioned that the process has helped them focus and find clarity in their work. For some, focus was a way of helping them stay on task and stay mindful of what they need to be working on in the present. For others, focus was a result of the process and made it possible for them to concentrate on those issues they could affect without other extraneous issues getting in the way. The Circle became a way for these women to overcome learned helplessness.

The Circle is a peer-to-peer type of exchange that uses the dialogue process itself to help a person focus. The process provides an opportunity for the participants to share with each other. The sharing helps them discharge those things that were affecting their ability to focus (Kauffman & New, 2004). The questions “what”; “so what”; and “now what”; also make it possible for participants to focus because they help a group make decisions about what is happening to them (individually and collectively), develop an understanding of why this is important to address, and make choices about what they will do (individually and collectively) about an issue (Payne, 1996).

Discharging is a term that comes from the literature on co-counseling or re-evaluation counseling. Discharging occurs when a person is able to drain the tension from an experience and re-evaluate that experience without going through the tension that was originally associated with that experience (Kauffman & New, 2004). The sharing of experiences peer to peer is one method of discharging. Elizabeth’s story, where she unpacked her experience as a young woman who wanted to go to college but was discouraged by the people around her, is an example of how discharging and re-evaluation provide greater focus. The sharing of that experience as a young woman and the subsequent re-evaluation of how it affected her perspective on going to college gave her insights on her own history that made it possible for her to “focus” her energy on going to college because that is what she really wanted to do.

### *Exploration of Identities*

Many of the women who participate in the Circles of Hope are working with many identities. Some are identities they are trying to sort and incorporate into their voice and others are identities that have been assigned to them that negatively affect their development. The Circle provides a safe place to explore issues of identity and unpack the identities that have negative consequences and build on those that reflect who they are and the values important to them. The Circles of Hope is a gender-based process designed to focus on their common identity as women but also provides space to incorporate their other identities as women into the dialogue (NCNW, 1993). For many of the women there are multiple identities that affect their personal growth and development such as race, national origin, disability, age, education, status as a parent, single motherhood and low income. These shape how the women view themselves and affects how others view them. This intersectionality of multiple identities affects their access to power, the types of oppression they may experience, and how they experience their identities (Delgado & Sefancic, 2001). The setting in which these issues are examined also affects how intersectionality is experienced (Crenshaw, 1995).

In the Circle the women are able to use the dialogue process as a way of exploring issues of identity and how they impact on their lives as women. For example, a dialogue that includes discussion about how the intersection of race and income affects women may help women in similar circumstances better understand what is happening to them. As the women discuss their experiences they are creating space where others with similar experiences have the opportunity to learn from the dialogue and begin to reflect on the stories they hear. The process also offers women opportunities to learn from the experiences of others who may not know or understand that experience. This can expand their worldview and help them become more empathetic and supportive to the differing needs of the women in the Circle.

Danielle's experience with the woman who was released from prison exemplifies the potential effect of this type of learning. The Circle exposed her to a perspective she had no understanding about before meeting the woman in a Circle. A woman in prison was a foreign concept to her. Through the dialogue she was able to get a much broader perspective on the woman's life and develop an understanding of how that additional identity affects this person's life. Danielle may not be in a position to directly assist this woman in her struggle to construct a decent life but as part of the Circle she can offer support. In addition, Danielle has learned to be more tolerant and sophisticated in her own understanding of how identities can affect people.

### *Risk Taking*

Working on issues of community change is risky business. There are lots of ways a person can get hurt, financially, psychologically, emotionally, and sometimes even physically. The Circle offers a place where risks can be taken with relatively little chance of injury. The women in this study have all taken risks. Makeda has given up a job and her private life to the work. There are risks associated with that kind of choice particularly as she gets older and has less support from her Social Security pension because she not shown a salary for more than ten years. Several of the women have gotten politically active which can be risky especially for someone like Gene who works for the City and has become engaged in local ward politics. Debbie talked about how she was concerned her engagement in public policy could potentially affect her standing in the community where she lives.

Often the work of the grassroots programs even community-based education programs like the Circles of Hope is focused on addressing some form of oppression such as sexism, racism, classism and others (Young & Padilla, 1990). This type of change entails risks because the dominant culture is not going to change their structures easily or without some struggle. The law in the United States typically supports equality

at the expense of equity so most marginalized people will have to take serious risks in order to create change (Bell, 2000).

The Circles of Hope helps prepare women to take risks. The dialogue process helps people develop a better understanding of the issues and their effect on them and their communities. The dialogic nature of the process helps people connect to each other, build consensus around issues, and design appropriate responses to those issues. The safety and support of the Circle provides the necessary encouragement to take chances and makes it possible for the women to try new ideas in a safe and nurturing environment.

### *Changing Worldview*

This was one of the more exciting aspects of this project for me. I was very interested in knowing if the process was transformative for the women. It appears that in several instances it was. Debbie, Elizabeth, Gene, and Danielle all talked extensively about how the process changed their view or perspective on the world. This in itself is not transformative but it is a step in the process (Mezirow, 1981). Their views on public policy, learning, development, and prisoner reentry were different after participating in the Circle. The process provides an opportunity for dialogue and reflection and it is this combination that makes transformation possible (Mezirow, 1991). All four of the women in the study who acknowledged perspective transformation also changed how they acted on the world. Debbie changed how she approached her public policy work. Elizabeth's new self image made it possible for her to go to school. Gene's new perspective on community made government more accessible to her. Danielle's experience made her more tolerant of people who had been in jail. Transformation occurred because their perceptions were challenged by the insights and experiences of others (Cranton, 1994).

The women live and work in an urban environment and are susceptible to the multitude of stressors that are inherent in living in an urban environment. Kapel and



Daley (2004) note that multiple stressors in an urban environment generate many different “disorienting dilemmas” that challenge transformative learning. This is an aspect of transformative learning that is very much in evidence with this group. During the past eight years the women in the group have undergone several “disorienting dilemmas” including health issues such as strokes, depression and cancer, loss of employment and constantly changing economic security, separation and/or divorce, and death in the family. The transformation that happens in a Circle can actually help these women find clarity among the various stressors that are negatively affecting their lives. The Circle provides a place of analysis where they can consider the effects that these stressors are having on their lives and reflect on what these changes mean for their reality.

#### *Developing Voice (Individual and Collective)*

Developing voice is learning to speak for oneself. It is about sharing a perspective on an issue. Many of the women who have been participants in the Circles of Hope had no public voice prior to becoming part of the Circle. What the dialogue in a Circle does is encourage the women to speak for themselves in a safe, regulated, environment where there is lots of support. The development of voice includes moving beyond sharing a perspective in the Circle about issues based on personal experience to contributing a perspective on a wide range of topics and issues (hooks, 1994). Many of the women in the Circle are still developing their voice as most people are but the Circle provides both a structure and a process where the women can develop and share their voices. Makeda discussed how she came to discover the importance of voice not only for herself but also for those who could benefit from her perspective.

I began to talk about things people in my community did not know and became an expert of sorts on issues that affected women, and I served as a voice for marginalized women and I was asked to speak locally,

nationally, and globally in a way not possible if I had remained isolated in my local community.

In chapter five I discussed about the experiences of the women in exercising their voices. It is empowering and an element of engagement. It is also necessary for them to express their ideas in order to begin contradict to essentialist ideas about who they are as people (Gunaratnam, 2003). When Gene began to speak up at her ward meetings she was expressing herself about the issues affecting her neighborhood and she was getting engaged. The Circle purposefully cultivates that voice.

Freire (1971) talked about how the poor people needed to become involved in their own development. Their direct engagement is what he thought was necessary. One of the goals of the literacy campaigns he led in Brazil and other parts of Latin America was to get people more engaged in addressing societal issues of oppression. They had to learn how the work affected them so that they could begin to act on it. Voice is an important step in becoming able to be an effective actor in creating change. The capacity to talk about the structures in society that limit a person's development is a necessary prerequisite to being able to change them. The stories these women can contribute will provide to a broader understanding of the structures in society that marginalize people (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

The women in the Circles of Hope develop voice by having education programs that introduce new information; the women have opportunities to speak and that helps them to find clarity and organize their thoughts, and they practice speaking with peers in the Circle. Using one's voice can be affirming and empowering in that the person has an opportunity to contribute. The others in the Circle reinforce or provide encouragement and this builds confidence and makes in possible for women to become more broadly engaged.

### Engagement in Community

The third part of the model is engaging in community. It builds on the first two parts of the model and extends the work of the Circle into the community. In this part of the analysis the theory is constructed from the stories of the women as they relate how their engagement in community was facilitated by the Circles of Hope process and their personal growth and development. This portion of the model is an extension of the grounded theory process as the model is emerging from the data provided by the women (Corbin & Strauss, 1998). Figure 3 illustrates how the Circles of Hope, personal growth and change, and engaging in the in the community lead to community change.

The model remains bi-directional because as the women become engaged in the community they are also contributing to their own personal growth and development and the development of the Circle. This is partially attributed to the different places the women come from. They came into the Circle with differing levels of commitment and capacity for creating community change. However, being part of a Circle and the personal growth change that results from being part of a Circle at some point facilitated the entry of all seven of the women into the public sphere as community change agents.

While the model is bi-directional some of the characteristics outlined in personal growth and change need to be present to some degree before a person is able to act as a change agent in their community. There is no magic line that states when someone is ready to create community change. This value becomes a function of the person's capacity and desire to play a change agent role in the community. However, what has become apparent in this study is that the women engaged in the Circle do become engaged in the community. They engage in different ways and at different times based on their own capacities and desires; as a result the bi-directional nature of the model will vary for each of the women depending on how many of the characteristics outlined in personal change and development they possess when they join a Circle.

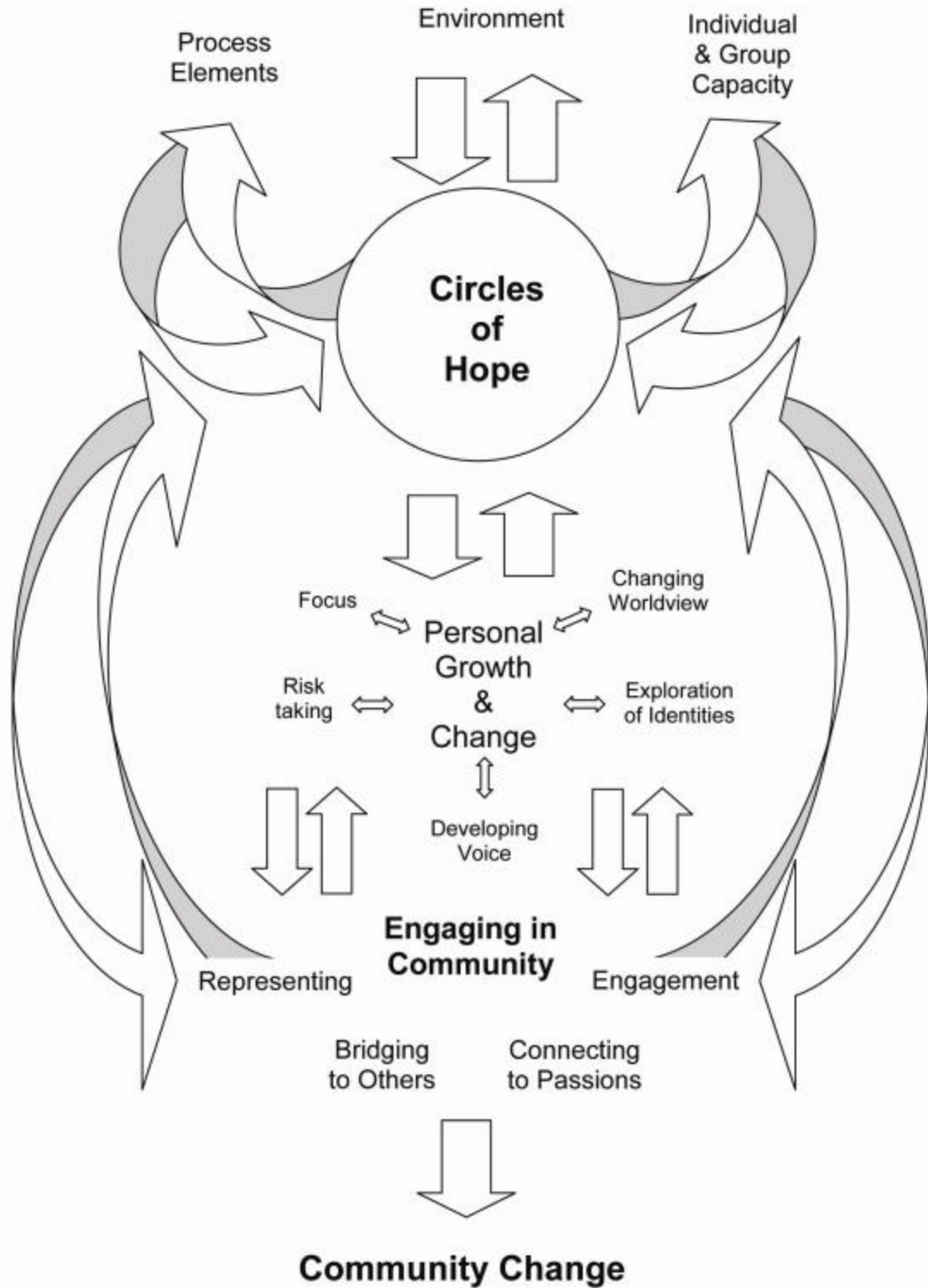


Figure 3. Circles of Hope as a model process for community change.

For example, Debbie was probably better prepared to act as a change agent when she first got involved in the Circles of Hope than Gene simply because Debbie was already an activist when she joined a Circle. Creating community change was already a value held by Debbie. Gene on the other hand did not realize until after she had been involved in a Circle awhile that she was even interested in becoming a change agent. Gene's version of the model was initially more linear than Debbie's because in order for Gene to become a change agent she needed to explore her identities, understand the issues affecting her development and that of her community, grow her worldview, and develop a support system. As these capacities developed for Gene she became more of a contributor and the model became more bi-directional.

The Circles of Hope is an engagement process and one of the stated goals of the process is to help women explore and develop their voices. They do this by engaging in learning, developing support systems that will make it possible to explore new ideas, experiment with new ways of doing things, and planning actions that will create the kinds of changes in themselves and in their communities. Engagement in community is the process of becoming involved in creating change in community and results from working the Circles of Hope process and the personal growth and change that results from being part of a Circle. Engagement in community manifested itself in four ways, 1) representing, 2) bridging to others, 3) connecting people to their passions and 4) engagement.

### *Representing*

"Representing" is showing up at different places in the community and participating as a representative of the Circles of Hope or the Imani Family Center. This is an important outcome because it reflects the desire of the women to represent their Circle in the broader community resulting in the growth of the Circle and extending it into the public sphere. There are three primary implications of representing. First, the

women are representing the Circle or WomanSpirit in the community and they feel they have an obligation to represent the Circle well; resulting in engagement that reflects the values and principles of the Circle. This occurs when they start a new program at a community church, facilitate a dialogue process for another organization, or network with existing service organizations such as the American Heart Association. Second, the Circle serves as a source of support and encouragement to the women as they venture into the community. They represent knowing that they have an organization behind them. This knowledge serves as a source of energy and power to the women as they enter into new relationships with groups and organizations that may have different values and norms from the Circle. Third, representing is an important way to grow the Circle and spread their influence into the community. When Obie is working with the American Heart Association she brings back resources to the Circle as a result of that relationship. These resources may contribute to the ongoing development of the Circle and contribute to the participants' personal growth and well-being. However, it is also an important way of sharing the work of the Circle with the broader community. When Obie represents with the American Heart Association she is also sharing what she has learned through the Circle with the broader community.

“Representing” is related to the concept of principled partnerships. When the women are representing it is a way for the Circle to reach out into the community to find partners they can work with. They are not necessarily allies but groups that may share similar values and/or goals (NCNW, 1993). A principled partner may be a university, non-profit, government or public organization. What is important to the Circle in this kind of relationship is that there are shared principles, the Circle is able to maintain their autonomy, and there is something to be gained from the relationship. Too often marginalized groups are dominated by their partners and their voices are lost or drowned out by their larger more sophisticated partners. A principled partnership

attempts to avoid these kinds of situations by entering into relationships slowly and negotiating a mutually beneficial relationship based on shared expectations and common principles (Payne, 1998).

### *Bridging to Others*

“Bridging to others” is an important concept based on building strategic relationships with other like minded organizations and joining networks of gender-based development organizations that share similar values and principles about development and gender equity. WomanSpirit is part of a national network called the National Congress of Neighborhood Women (NCNW) and internationally they are represented by Grassroots Organizations Operating Together in Sisterhood (GROOTS). These networks offer additional systems of support, provide safe venues for articulating their concerns and sharing their ideas, and expose them to different perspectives on emerging issues as they affect women across the country and throughout the world. Engaging in these networks has played an important role in the Circles of Hope process. The peer exchanges have connected the women in the Circle to diverse voices and role models from around the world. The diversity has greatly expanded their worldview. Participation in international caucuses and events has helped them understand their voices are important to public policy. The positive reinforcement they have received from their peers around the world has helped them view themselves and their experiences as meaningful and linked to a wider world. They can go to international development events and know they have something to contribute; their voices and their process for development.

These networks open up opportunities for themselves and their community. In the summer of 2006, WomanSpirit was invited to take a delegation of youth from their community to Stuttgart, Germany to participate in youth leadership summit sponsored by the United Nations Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (UNESCO). Eight

young people (four boys and four girls), ages 14 to 18 went to Stuttgart to participate in the summit representing their community. They did a lot of work preparing for the trip and met with community leaders and government officials. The St. Louis County Council issued a proclamation that the young people took with them on their journey to share with their counterparts in Germany. When they left they truly felt they were representing their community. While in Stuttgart they were treated like foreign dignitaries while they visited with local leaders and participated in international dialogues. In October of 2006 they will have the opportunity to host a similar delegation from Stuttgart. It has been a life altering experience for the young people made available to them because of the networks developed through the Circles of Hope.

The networks are a form of social capital that the Circle has purposely developed to support their work and enhance their development options. Social capital can be described as “the norms and networks that enable people to act collectively” (Narayan & Woolcock 2000, p. 225). It includes the groups, organizations and networks operating within a community. When considered with economic opportunities, cultural realities, education and other development factors in a community, social capital can help us better understand the realities marginalized groups face. Deepa Narayan (1999) describes two types of social capital, bonding social capital and bridging social capital. Bonding social capital includes the relationships fostered among those with similar backgrounds such as those who share a common racial or ethnic heritage. Bridging social capital includes the networks that tie diverse groups and people together. “Bonding social capital” is often most prevalent in poor communities because the leveraging of this capital helps poor people make ends meet (Narayan & Woolcock (2000).

The relationships that an organization like WomanSpirit has developed with these two networks would be a form of bridging capital (that Flora, Flora & Fey (2004).



Bridging relationships are a form of development. They are based on weak ties, meaning that the relationships may not be very personal but are highly functional. It is not necessary to know a person well to do business with them. However the relationships are developmental. All parties need to derive some benefit out of the relationship. Bonding social capital is more like the relationships that actually exist within the Circle. These are based on strong ties and commitment to one another (Deepa Narayan (1999). When social capital is effective in a community there exist strong relationships among groups and individuals within the organization that share similar interests and backgrounds (bonding social capital) and diverse relationships to other groups and interests in the community (bridging social capital) (Flora, Flora & Fey, 2004). The Circles of Hope intuitively understand how these forms of social capital work together. The Circle is a place where they develop strong ties to one another through the Circle for mutual support. These relationships help them meet their immediate needs. What makes the process developmental and relevant to community development is that they also have quality bridging capital relationships. Bridging capital is important for development beyond meeting one's basic needs and is particularly important to groups marginalized by the larger society because the bridging networks help them connect to resources in the broader community that can support them in their development process.

The project Elizabeth created to help young people get into college is a good example of how bridging capital can be leveraged for community development. Elizabeth wanted to increase access to higher education for the young people in her community that others did not believe would make good college students. She developed a program that helped the students pick a school, raise money, and complete the requirements necessary to enter school. One important part of her strategy was to volunteer at one of the trade schools in the community in order to better understand how

the admissions process worked and to be in a position to vouch for her students as they tried to gain admissions. Over time, as she becomes an insider at the school where she volunteers, Elizabeth may also be able to influence and shape how the admissions process works because her input as a trusted member of the community is valued. Her story illustrates a fairly sophisticated understanding of bridging relationships and their importance to her project.

Bridging relationships are a key resource for the Circles of Hope because they have been able to develop a number of strategic relationships that provide ongoing support, share common agendas, and provide public forums for sharing and learning about perspectives outside their own daily reality. Connecting to other groups is something they do purposefully. They began as a way to learn from other groups of women with similar experiences through peer exchanges. Initially they were meeting with other groups of women locally through their networks and as their networking became more sophisticated they were invited to become part of national and international networks.

Participation in the networks provided the women with a more global perspective. What they found was missing at these meetings was the perspective of low-income women from North America which is part of who they are. They became more involved in national and international forums lending their own perspectives and voices to public dialogues on issues of development. As connection to their networks increased they found their voices were desired in national and international forums. These forums became a way to learn from others and share their own perspectives on both a micro level through peer exchanges which are typically small group to small group and on a macro stage through national and international development forums. These opportunities contributed to the development of the women in the Circle because they were able to develop broader perspectives on development issues that affected low-

income women, further explore and share their identities, and more broadly engage in community development through national and international forums.

*Connecting People to Their Passions*

One way that the Circles have managed to engage people in creating community change is that they have helped people connect into those passions that they really care about and then offer them opportunities to build on those passions. This outcome is directly connected to personal growth and change in that as people develop their own capacities they are better able to contribute their talents to the broader community (Kretzman & McKnight, 1993).

The cases where the women had the greatest affect were in addressing those issues that were important to them. In this kind of work connecting people to the things they care about most is how their development efforts are sustained over time. These efforts are often aimed at creating change often at a local-level. For example, Aeshe's concern for African American men led her to set up her Alley Oops group; Elizabeth's passion for learning motivated her to train homeless men how to use technology; Ola's commitment to veterans motivated her to work on the House of David transitional housing project; and Debbie's concern for public participation in policy development manifested itself in a grassroots effort to engage people in dialogue about the impacts of healthcare reform. Each of these is an example of how the women were able to tap into their passions to create meaningful change in their communities.

Grassroots education and development organizations like WomanSpirit often operate on the margins of mainstream economic, social, and cultural institutions and are better able to address issues of structural change because they are not as closely vested in those existing institutional frameworks (Corson, 1998; Hugo, 2002). The efforts of these women do not have a lot of institution support in terms of financial resources that they can leverage in a project and the women themselves do not have a

lot of resources of their own to commit to a project. The pattern they follow is dictated less by what the community has determined is important and tends to reflect their own perceptions of what is important for them to address. Their ideas are supported and reinforced by the Circle which tends to be a principle resource in their efforts. Since their efforts are typically focused on some aspect of development and social change there are few resources available to them in the mainstream institutional framework that typically supports these types of development efforts in the community (Hugo, 2002; King, 1989; Young & Padilla, 1990).

Since the Circle is gender-based and the women's issues are considered marginal to the mainstream development community it is important that they initiate programs that ignite their passions, connect to their core values and do not require a lot of outside capital. The examples above exemplify these principles. They have initiated some important community development program with limited resources. Debbie's, project was the only one I mentioned that included any additional outside resource. She is also the person most closely connected to the mainstream economic, social, and cultural institutions so he has greater access to those resources than the others in the Circle. The women are able to affect change without spending a lot of money because they selected projects they care about and even though they may not bring a lot of financial resources they bring a lot of passion and commitment to the project and that increases the probability they will have a measure of success.

These types of projects are important outcomes of the Circles of Hope process and they are powerful examples of how the process has evolved and extended into the community. In the examples I mentioned above the women extended the Circles of Hope process by starting their own Circle in the community around an issue that they are passionate about and in this manner are been able share what they have learned in the Circles of Hope in the community. In addition, the experiences, connections, and

outcomes they achieve inform the Circles of Hope and enhance the learning and development of the women in the Circle.

This concept links well to the literature on asset-based community development (Green & Haines, 2003; Kretzman & McKnight, 1993). Asset-based community development is an approach to development based on the premise that all communities have resources available to them that they can use as a foundation for their own development efforts. It is a capacity-driven approach that assumes people are able to address the issues that affect them. Development efforts are exemplified in processes that help people chart their own development goals based on a vision for the future that they have generated for themselves and that builds on existing resources (Kretzman & McKnight, 1993).

Asset-based community development is an attractive approach to many groups and communities marginalized by mainstream society because it is based on the development of the existing capacities of the community initiating development and relies on engagement of the community in its own development. It is also a hopeful process. The focus is on what is possible building on the existing strengths that exist in the community. Asset-based community development is an attempt to contradict more traditional deficit models of development that focus on conducting a community needs assessment to identify all the issues in the community, rank them in importance, and develop remedies that will resolve the issues. These approaches to development are typically expert-driven. When community members are engaged in the process the issues identified as most important to address are often not the issues the community wants to work on thus projects are only sustained as long as there are resources available to continue the work.

The Circles of Hope can be described as an asset-based approach to development. The focus is on the Circle charting its own development path building on

the resources, interests, and passions of the women in the Circle. One of the hallmarks of asset-based community development is the capacity inventory (Kretzman & McKnight, 1993). The capacity inventory is an engagement and learning tool that helps people redefine their places, relationships, associations, and other aspects of the community in ways that define them as assets for community-building. It replaces the traditional needs assessment. There is an asset inventory for assessing the housing, individual capacities of community members, organizations, youth, senior citizens, and many others. It is designed as a discovery process. People in the community conduct the assessments so in addition to collecting the information it serves as a way of helping people rediscover their communities in a more positive way than traditional deficit focused models of development. The Circles of Hope works in much the same way. The process is one of discovery. The women learn more about themselves, their communities, and the issues affecting their development. The work is driven by a vision for the future that respects what they hold sacred in the present, cultivates their own leadership, results in change that they have defined for themselves, and is sustained by their passion for the issue they are working to address.

### *Engagement*

Engagement is both a means to an end and an outcome of the Circles of Hope process. It is a means to an end because engagement is how the women create the change in the community that they desire. It is an outcome because a goal of the Circles of Hope process is women engaged in creating community change. At its most basic level engagement is about getting people involved in creating their own futures and expressing their own leadership. All seven of the women interviewed as part of this project have become engaged in creating change on some level in their communities. They attribute much of their ability to serve as change agents to the Circles of Hope process. These women come from a variety of different perspectives but they all want to

create something better for themselves and their families. The Circle provides a place to develop the skills necessary to become change agents. What is equally important is that three of the women did not join the Circle to become engaged in community change. They joined for social reasons and personal goals yet they still emerged as change agents engaged in their communities.

One way to explain this phenomenon is by revisiting Freire's (1971) concept of *Conscientização* or consciousness-raising. Freire believed that if a person truly understood how the oppressive structures in society affected their lives and the lives of others in the community that this realization would motivate the oppressed to actively become engaged in trying to address these issues and change the societal structures that were the source of the oppression. He believed education programs that were part of a discovery process where the learners and the educators worked in tandem as co-learners exploring an issue and developing a deeper understanding of its impact would lead to *conscientização*. I believe the women engaged in the Circles of Hope experienced the type of consciousness-raising that Freire articulated throughout his writing and in the process created an approach to development that provides a model for engaging in community that links personal growth and change to engagement in creating community social change.

### Conclusions

The purpose of this research was to gain a better understanding of how participation in Circles of Hope impacted the lives of the women in the educational process. I explored two aspects of this change process. 1) How has participation in the process changed them personally? 2) How have these women become engaged in creating change in their families and communities? Each of the women underwent a tremendous amount of personal change in the past few years and the Circles of Hope played an important role in that which the women attributed to their participation in the

process. The combination of social support, education for action, and organizing for change, in safe environment, with a diverse group of motivated people created the right kind of environment for women to develop their capacities as leaders. What they have done is created a community learning environment where place, process, and people come together to explore issues in an analytic way that leads to an action agenda.

The women have also become change agents in their communities as a result of their participation in the Circles of Hope process and their own personal growth and change. On some level all seven of the women are engaged in some type of community change effort. The Circles of Hope is clearly a community building process based in the culture of the Circle created and established by the founder and developed by the Circle. The Circle is a place where the participants do a lot of identity work, exploring and developing themselves in ways that are beneficial to them and result in their increased activity in the community. These findings are consistent with similar work done in New Social Movements literature where they have found that where cultural capital is generated people are empowered to act in the public sphere from their location in the community (Delanty, 2003; Fine, 1995; Friedman & McAdam, 1992).

The Circles of Hope empowers people to act in their community. The women are engaged in change efforts locally, nationally, and internationally. The model developed through the stories of these women's experiences in the Circles of Hope not only help us better understand how development based in identity work leads to community engagement but also provides a model for others to consider as they look at building their own programs for creating community change.

One of the principle limitations of the Circle and this study is the extent to which the experiences of these women can be duplicated in other contexts. Makeda plays a crucial role as the principle designer and leader of the organization. She has given up a lot in terms of her own development in order to be available to the organization and the



other women in her Circles. It is difficult to gauge her importance to the development of the Circle and the progress the other women in the Circle were able to make in their own development which I think is critical to their engagement in the community.

Another limitation to the study relates to the women's position in the larger community. The process has been successful in helping these women make changes in their community but it is based on them organizing in a Circle, educating themselves on the issues impact their lives within a values framework that reflects their norms and values which are often different from those of the broader community. Therefore it has had a limited impact in creating the conditions for the kinds of social change that would have broad benefits to others in the community. The process is not designed to organize people to work on sweeping social change because it is values-based development that works incrementally to create change and is based on extending the work the women do in their private lives into the community (Stall & Stoecker, 1998). Through the networks they have developed they are able to connect their work to larger social issues but the process itself does not drive those interactions.

The Circles of Hope is not a public sphere process that mobilizes people to confront the power centers that exist in a community but instead works on engaging the voices of the women in the public discourse and getting them involved in creating public change in ways that reflect the principles and values important to them. Most of the women also exist at the margins of society in economic terms. Their work as change agents often has to be balanced with their need to meet their own needs. Because they do not have the resources available to them that others in the community are able to access the changes they are able to enact come slowly because it takes a lot of their time to meet their basic needs. This means that the change comes slowly. However, if they were ever able to secure the resources to commit their time more fully to engaging in community change I believe that they would have a broader impact.

Community-based education provided the framework for looking at this learning process as one that helps people in a larger society, largely disenfranchised by that society, find their voice and create public space for themselves. The Circles of Hope provided the space for them to develop in a way that preserves those values important to them and those values guide them in their interactions with others of similar and different perspectives. This program was developed by women for women and its role as a gender-based development process is important because it helps to challenge existing development paradigms and served as a catalyst for these women to become more involved in their communities.

#### Future Research

There are several additional questions to explore regarding the Circles of Hope process, the findings of this study and the effectiveness of the process with other groups of people. One important place to start is to consider how other groups of people who have experience with similar kinds of development processes. The Leadership Support Process (LSP) which is the primary dialogue process that the Circles of Hope is based on has been adapted in several parts of the world. As a next step I think a similar follow-up project with women in other cultural contexts would be an important way to begin to see if the experience of the women in St. Louis is unique to them or part of a larger wave of people able to produce similar types of development outcomes.

Another area of research would be to begin to quantify what some of the changes mean that these women have gone through. Is there a way to measure the impact of a changing world view? What are the implications of increased focus? Are they more productive than they were before? There are a whole series of questions that would be helpful to quantify so that more details of the model can be better understood and developed.

It is important to take a closer look at the role the networking relationships have on the outcomes of the process. I have witnessed how much the women, especially the leadership of grassroots organizations, benefit from peer to peer exchanges. It quickly became obvious to me that being a member of network was one of the more important ingredients to the process as all the participants mentioned their importance and several linked their learning and learning outcomes to the peer exchanges that resulted from their networking efforts. They all mentioned how important it was to have access to diverse perspectives.

The process should be explored more deeply in relationship to the literature on social capital. Networking (internally and externally) has surfaced as an outcome or result of the process as well as something that contributes to their ability to create community change. A closer look at the relationship between process, education, social capital and community change would shed more light on the relationship between process and people's capacity to create change through the development of their social capital and networks. This is a factor we did not explore in the interviews.

Finally, I think it is important to examine more closely the role of the facilitator in these kinds of development processes. Someone such as Makeda, who is charismatic and an excellent group process facilitator helps create a space to be open and learn. How important her leadership is to the ultimate outcomes of the women and their engagement in the community is difficult to ascertain without exploring more closely the leadership role that she and other facilitators play in helping people work the process successfully.

The Circles of Hope is a grassroots women's educational program that develops the leadership capacity of its members. Through the experiences of these seven women, I was able to illustrate how the Circles of Hope process works and develop a better understanding of how the process contributes to personal growth and change and

engagement in the community. I think I have begun to build a framework for a model about community change linked to this process. Documenting the narratives of participants and facilitators illuminates an important perspective on the impact of community groups on individuals and the larger world. I believe the model presented in this research provides ample evidence of the linkage between participation in the Circles of Hope, personal growth and change, and becoming a change agent in the community and it goes a step further by illustrating how the change process actually works in a way that others can try to replicate.

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## Appendix A – Questionnaire

### Research Question

The purpose of this research is to gain a better understanding of how participation in *Circles of Hope* has impacted the lives of the women who have participated in the educational process. Implicit in this question is the assumption that change has occurred as a result of their participation. I want to explore two aspects of this change process. 1) Has there been any personal impact? 2) Have these women become engaged in creating change in their families and communities? In studying the Circles of Hope process I hope to learn more about how the process works from the perspective of the women. I am interested in their personal stories and constructed meanings. Through their stories I hope to better understand the changes they have undergone personally and how they have applied what they have learned in their families and communities.

### Introduction

I am trying to better understand the Circles of Hope process and the types of contributions that you have made using this process or skills that you have acquired through your experiences with the Circles of Hope and the Imani Family Center. I am not evaluating the Circles of Hope. I am interested in your own unique personal experiences.

I want to understand the relationship between your experiences and your own development so that we can better understand how a process like the Circles of Hope helps people develop themselves and contribute to the development of others. So, your personal experiences are very important to this research. There are no right or wrong answers to any of the questions I will ask you.

### Interview Questions

#### **Context**

1. What or who first brought you to WomanSpirit and the Circles of Hope Process?
  - a. What attracted you to the program?
  - b. What is it about the place that appeals to you?
  - c. What is it about the people that appeals to you?

#### **The Process Experience**

2. How long have you been involved with WomanSpirit and the Circles of Hope process?
3. Tell me something about the Circle(s) you have participated in?
  - a. What has it been like to be a part of a Circle?
  - b. Have you been part of a particular Circle for a long time?
  - c. What are some things that have stood out for you in the Circles where you have regularly participated?

4. How would you describe the Circles of Hope process to someone who knows nothing about it?
5. What do feel are the strengths of the process for you?
  - a. What are the main ingredients in the Circles process that work for you?
6. Have you used what you learned in a Circle in other areas of your life? If so how?
7. Are you able to lead groups or meeting using the skills you have acquired through the Circles process? If so, describe how it works for you?
  - a. How is your use of the process similar to the WomanSpirit process?
  - b. How is it different from the WomanSpirit process?

### **Personal Growth and Change**

8. Were you hoping to change or do something differently in your life when you first began participating in a Circle?
9. What kind of changes have you made in your life since you first got involved with the Circles of Hope?
  - a. Do you think involvement in Circles of Hope helped you make those changes, if so, how?
10. Learning is an important goal of the Circles of Hope process. How has participating in the process impacted or affected your learning?
  - a. What are some of the things you have learned or the skills you have developed as a result of participating in a Circle?
11. Another aspect of the Circle is personal support. Has the support made a difference to you? If, so, in what ways
12. Do you believe the Circles of Hope process has helped you develop your abilities to help others? Please explain.

### **Engagement in Community/Creating or Addressing Change**

I want to ask a few questions relating to your experiences in the Circles process and your involvement in community life. I am defining community very broadly. It can as small as a family or as large as the neighborhood or city. It can be connected to a place or an interest you have.

13. What do you think it means to be an active member of a community?
14. How would you describe your participation in the community?

15. What kind of involvement have you had in community-based organizations and events since you got involved in the Circles of Hope and Womanspirit?
  - a. Can you provide examples
16. Do you feel like participating in the Circles of Hope process has made it possible for you to become more involved in community affairs, if so, how?
17. How does the "Circles of Hope" enhance your ability to participate more fully in the community/broader society?
18. Can you describe a community event or project that you have been involved in where your experience with the Circles of Hope was of help?
19. Do you feel that you are someone who creates and supports change in the community? If so, how?
20. Can you describe an experience where you have worked to create change?

Demographic Information

**Age (check one)**

- Under 25
- 25 to 35
- 35 to 45
- 45 to 55
- 55 to 65
- 65 and over

**Family Household Income (check one)**

- Less than \$14,999 per year
- \$15,000 to \$24,999 per year
- \$25,000 to \$34,999 per year
- \$35,000 to \$44,999 per year
- \$45,000 to \$54,999 per year
- Over \$55,000

Do you have a physical disability?

Are you employed, unemployed, student, retired, medically retired?

How would you describe your present and past occupational history?

Are you involved in any child rearing activities?

Do you maintain your own home?

Do you live alone?

What was your highest level of educational attainment?

## Appendix B – Focus Group Questions

1. All of you have considerable experience in the Circles of Hope process. When you think about your experiences what do you think makes it work for you?
  - a. What do you feel are the strengths of the process?
  - b. What are some things that have stood out for you in the Circles where you have regularly participated and felt an integral part of the process?
  - c. What is it like to be a member of a Circle? What are the benefits?
  
2. How does being a member of a Circle help you address issues associated with change?
  - a. Are there skills that are acquired?
  - b. Is it the learning?
  - c. Is it the support?
  - d. How do these things work together to make it possible for the women in the Circle to better address issues associated with change?
  
3. How does the Circles of Hope enhance your ability to participate more fully in the community/broader society?
  - a. Can you give examples of how you have been able to use either what you have learned through a Circle to become more engaged in the community?
  - b. What about the process, do you use the process or elements of it in the broader community and society?
  - c. Can you describe an experience where you have worked to create change?



Appendix C – Consent Form



Department of Adult Education

8001 Natural Bridge Road  
St. Louis, Missouri 63121-4499  
Telephone: 314-516-xxxx  
Fax: 314-516-xxxx  
E-mail: xxxxx@umsl.edu

**Informed Consent for Participation in Research Activities**

Student Research—Understanding the Circles of Hope Process

Participant \_\_\_\_\_ HSC Approval Number \_\_\_\_\_

Principal Investigator Stephen Jeanetta \_\_\_\_\_ PI's Phone Number (573)884-3018 \_\_\_\_\_

**Why am I being asked to participate?**

You are invited to participate in a research study that explores the Circles of Hope process conducted by Stephen Jeanetta, a doctoral student in the Adult education program, at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. You have been asked to participate in the research because of your experience with Circles of Hope and your association with WomanSpirit and the Imani Family Center. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the research. Your participation in this research is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without affecting that relationship.

**What is the purpose of this research?**

The purpose of this research is to gain a better understanding of how participation in *Circles of Hope* has impacted the lives of the women who have participated in the educational process. Implicit in this question is whether they believe change has actually occurred as a result of their participation. We want to explore two aspects of this change process. 1) How women changed personally? 2) What factors lead to women assuming the role of change agent in their families and communities?

**What procedures are involved?**

If you agree to participate in this research, you can expect:

- To participate in one 90 minute interview to be held at the Imani Family Center. This interview will be recorded and transcribed into text.
- To participate in one 90 minute focus group to held at the Imani Family Center. The focus group will be held once all the research participants have been interviewed and will include all six research participants.
- To participate in one 90 minute follow-up interview to be held at the Imani Family Center if necessary. This follow-up interview will only be necessary if after an initial

analysis of the original interview and focus group activity that further clarification is required.

Approximately seven women will be involved in this research at the University of Missouri-St. Louis.

**What are the potential risks and discomforts?**

We don't anticipate any risks or discomforts associated with this participating in this project.

**Will I be told about new information that may affect my decision to participate?**

During the course of the study, you will be informed of any significant new findings (either good or bad), such as changes in the risks or benefits resulting from participation in the research, or new alternatives to participation, that might cause you to change your mind about continuing in the study. If new information is provided to you, your consent to continue to participate in this study will be re-obtained.

**What about privacy and confidentiality?**

The only people who will know that you are a research subject are members of the research team and the other participants who take part in the focus group. No information about you, or provided by you during the research, will be disclosed to others without your written permission, except:

- if necessary to protect your rights or welfare (for example, if you are injured and need emergency care or when the University of Missouri-St Louis Institutional Review Board monitors the research or consent process); or
- if required by law.

When the results of the research are published or discussed in conferences, no information will be included that would reveal your identity. If photographs, videos or audiotape recordings of you will be used for educational purposes, your identity will be protected or disguised. Any information that is obtained in connection with this study, and that can be identified with you, will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law.

The interviews will be recorded and transcribed into a computer text file verbatim. If you would like to review a copy of the recording or the transcript the researcher will make a copy available to you.

Once the data has been transcribed into a text file copies of both the recording and the transcript will be kept on a computer at the University of Missouri where it will be accessible only to the researcher conducting this study. You will be assigned a pseudonym for the purpose of this study. Reference to you in the tapes and transcriptions will be according to your pseudonym. A record of each participant and their pseudonym will be kept in a separate file away from the transcriptions and recordings in the unlikely event that someone unauthorized accesses the transcripts.

The research team will use and share your information until [possible end points](#). At that point, the investigator will remove the identifiers from your information, making it impossible to link you to the study.

Do you already have contact restrictions in place with UM-SL?     Yes  No  
(Example: no calls at home, no messages left for you, etc.)

Please specify any contact restrictions you want to request for this study only.

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**What are the costs for participating in this research?**

There are no costs associated with participating in this research and you will not be paid for your participation in this research.

**Can I withdraw or be removed from the study?**

You can choose whether to be in this study. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You also may refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer and still remain in the study. The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so. If you decide to end your participation in the study, please complete the withdrawal letter found at <http://www.umsl.edu/services/ora/IRB.html>, or you may request that the Investigator send you a copy of the letter.

**Who should I contact if I have questions?**

The researcher conducting this study is Stephen Jeanetta. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact the researcher by phone at (573) 884-3018 or by e-mail at [jeanettas@missouri.edu](mailto:jeanettas@missouri.edu).

**What are my rights as a research subject?**

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may call the Chairperson of the Institutional Review Board at (314) 516-5897.

**Remember:** Your participation in this research is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without affecting that relationship.

You will be given a copy of this form for your information and to keep for your records.

**I have read the above statement and have been able to express my concerns, to which the investigator has responded satisfactorily. I believe I understand the purpose of the study, as well as the potential benefits and risks that are involved. I authorize the use of my PHI and give my permission to participate in the research described above.**

**All signature dates must match.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Signature      Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Printed Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Witness' Signature      Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Witness' Printed Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher's Signature      Date

## Appendix D – Summary of Themes by Participant

### **Makeda**

1. Peer Group as Family
2. Diversity of People and Experiences
3. Equal Participation and Shared Leadership
4. Basic Agreements
5. Structure for Analysis and Learning
6. Self Determination and the Development of Women
7. Principled Partnerships
8. Engagement
9. A Place for Everyone
10. Bridging to Others and Sharing the Process

### **Aeshe**

1. Problem Solving
2. Reinforcement and Credibility
3. Experiential Learning
4. Links to Faith
5. Simplify
6. Participation

### **Debbie**

1. Exposure to Diverse People, Ideas, Cultures and Concepts
2. Framework for Having Meaningful Conversations
3. Exploring Interconnections
4. Exploring Identity
5. Working with the Public and Encountering Diverse Perspectives
6. Engaging People in Policy Development

### **Danielle**

1. Passion for Service and Personal Development
2. Skills Formation
3. New Perspectives
4. Stepping Out
5. Expanding Her Leadership

### **Obie**

1. Giving Voice and Becoming Engaged
2. Showing Up and Representing
3. Focus
4. Making Connections and Building Linkages
5. Brokering Resources

**Gene**

1. Engaging with Others, Building Relationships, and a Changing Worldview
2. Helping Through Sharing
3. Energy and Support Systems
4. Listening and Not Criticizing
5. Financial Security
6. Speaking Out and Using Her Voice

**Elizabeth**

1. Finding Commonality
2. Learning as Self Esteem Building
3. Self Advocacy and Creating Change
4. Cross Generational Sharing
5. Learning for Development
6. Hospitality