



Circles to Break the Poverty Cycle

by Mary Beth Coudal

At age 32, Sonia Holycross has “been there, done that”—lived in a broken home, joined a gang, acquired a rap sheet. But through the Circles™ Campaign,* Holycross, a single parent of five and now an Americorps volunteer, has patched her life together, becoming stronger in the broken places. “The Circles Campaign is like mending a broken foundation with fresh cement,” Holycross says.

Sonia Holycross’s family forms one of 13 Circles in Troy, Ohio, participating in a Circles Campaign through Partners of Hope, an outgrowth of the Troy Council of Churches. Two of the 16 churches of the council are United Methodist—First United Methodist Church and Richards Chapel.

The United Methodist Church will be launching a pilot ministry—like the one in Troy, Ohio—to target poverty on two sites in three North

Carolina counties: Anson, Wilkes, and Yadkin. The General Board of Global Ministries, partnering with the denomination’s Western North Carolina Conference, has set a goal to help 75 families climb out of the cycles of poverty that have affected them for two or more generations. Using the Circles™ poverty-elimination model and training developed by Move the Mountain Leadership Center in Iowa, Global Ministries is launching the first of five global models of ministry that seek to eliminate poverty. Global Ministries expects to launch four other models in different countries and settings around the world.

“Circles is a partnership that, from what I’ve seen, absolutely can eradicate poverty,” says Jerald McKie, a Global Ministries’ associate general secretary working with community and institutional ministries. “It isn’t

a sweeping program—it goes family by family. A family in poverty that lacks the means to change becomes a Circle leader. Three to four Circle allies support the family. The process calls for allies to give of themselves—sometimes through material giving but more often through sharing the access to resources that the middle and upper classes take for granted but that poorer people lack. This model in the Western North Carolina Conference will develop 25 circles in three parts of the conference, which is led by Bishop Larry Goodpaster. These three sites may become training centers for United Methodist community ministries in the rest of the United States.”

The North Carolina sites were a good choice for the pilot program because United Methodist community networks already operate in the con-



Opposite p. 16, left: Tiffany, Nancy, and Kelly form a Springfield, Ohio, Circle; **right:** Deborah Diggs, Cathy Zanon, Latoya Bagley, and Nick McCornish attend a Circles meeting in Columbus, Ohio. **Clockwise from upper left:** Circle leaders Scott McDonald, Tracie McDonald, Mike Lafoe, Asia Davis, and Sonia Holycross, in Troy, Ohio. Photo: Allison DeHart. Jessica and Chris are Circle leaders in Sedalia, Missouri; Circle leaders Kristin and Karin in Springfield, Ohio; Asia Davis (in white blouse) and allies (left to right) Karen Beagle, Shauna Jackson, and Doug Jackson in Springfield, Ohio. Photo: Allison DeHart. A Circles meeting at Broad Street Presbyterian Church in Columbus, Ohio. Photos Courtesy Move the Mountain Leadership Center.

ference. Global Ministries became involved in the campaign through one of its former directors, Dr. Alan Rice, director of Rural Ministry and Community Development and the RFD Community Development Corporation for the Western North Carolina conference. The Circles Campaign is set to become an integral part of United Methodism's churchwide antipoverty focus.

UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL CAPITAL

Sonia Holycross is a survivor of generational poverty, a kind of entrenched poverty that might take three and a half years to alleviate. Another kind, situational poverty, happens as a result of job loss or a medical emergency and can usually be alleviated in one and a half years, according to Circles research. The strategy behind the Circles Campaign is to empower and connect people living in poverty through the currency of social capital.

The term "social capital," first coined in 1961, refers to social relationships as a means through which individuals and groups can access resources from other classes or social networks. Anthropologists have studied the existence of social capital within cultures around the world.

"If we can learn to stay connected to others, especially when problems come up that we were taught to solve by ourselves (like problems with money), then we can solve the problems more efficiently, while keeping our sense of humor intact," says Scott Miller, co-founder of Move the Mountain Leadership Center.

IT'S WHO YOU KNOW

Those seeking a way out of the poverty cycle are the heart of the Circles Campaign. As Circle leaders, they are the hub of the wheel, the place from which new connections and directions can radiate. Circle leaders do research, identify roadblocks, and direct their family's movement away from the grasp of poverty.

Circle allies volunteer to provide support, opportunities for networking, references, and other forms of assistance to Circle leaders. Circle leaders participate in a 13-week training course, for which they receive a stipend; they learn how to assess their needs, develop goals, and acquire resources. Circle leaders then meet weekly with Circle allies and community members. Through support from Circle allies, attendance at training events, and

weekly meetings, Circle leaders are empowered to make changes and transform their own lives.

Successful Circle leaders become allies in other circles.

BREAKING OUT OF THE ISOLATION

Having to face any problem alone compounds its misery. The Circles Campaign encourages community members to empathize with one another, alleviating the isolation that can cause and perpetuate poverty.

In March 2009, Mike Inscore, Mayor of Wilkesboro, NC, attended a Circles Summit on Poverty and Suffering held in Conover, NC, and partially funded by Global Ministries. "During the presentation," he said, "I identified with those less fortunate and realized that, if not for the many adults who intervened in my young life to break my cycle of poverty, my level of success would have been far less." The mayor was among 300 North Carolinians who came to be trained as Circle allies, learning about the complexity and practicalities of living in poverty.

One exercise from the training that prompted lively discussion was the question of whether a middle- or upper-class person would have the resources or stamina to live in poverty. For example, the trainers asked, "Could you pack all your belongings and move to a new shelter in a matter of hours?" Most admitted they could not.



Photo: Move the Mountain Leadership Center.



Photo: Move the Mountain Center.

Circle assistants with participants' children in Springfield, Ohio.

When people become part of a group whose members care about one another, they feel less isolated and desperate. If people can get help from others in handling short-term challenges, such as transportation or child care, they have more time to pursue long-term goals. One way to solve entrenched problems is to ask other people for help or advice. As Sonia Holycross put it: "I wanted help. But being in poverty is like screaming in the middle of the ocean. You want to change, but you stay in the same situation. People in that situation are like crabs in a bucket—they pull each other down."

CIRCLE ALLIES

Circle allies contribute to their Circle leaders' lives by "journeying with" them, not "doing for" them. Those who live within middle- or upper-class communities have resources and social capital to spare and share.

Mary Beth Robertson of Troy, Ohio, was one of Sonia Holycross's four Circle allies. "When we went through the Bridges Out of Poverty training," Robertson said, "we allies were often told, 'You are not supposed to take on the role of authority or parent.' Even though I was told that, I thought, 'Surely they're mistaken.' But they were right. Sonia became my friend."

"Sonia and I are at opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of socioeconomic perspectives," Robertson added. "Yet we have so many similarities. Our dreams, our sense of humor, even many of our life experiences are similar."

Holycross agreed. "We grew close," she said. "Her life has not always been easy. She's been, at times, a single mother. She and my daughter are very close." One of the Holycross children has chronic health problems. Robertson is helping the teenager manage pain by teaching her yoga techniques. Circle allies often work in surprising ways.

Another example of how allies contribute to the Circle is a used-car dealer who donated a car and mechanical servicing for two years so that a Circle leader did not have automotive concerns while gaining her foothold in society. "A lot of people get where they are because they know somebody," Holycross observed.

Shelly and Marlo attend a Circles meeting in Ohio.

THE ROLE OF CHURCHES

Circle leaders and allies create long-lasting relationships that help bridge the gap between the poor and the middle class. As Circle leaders and allies connect across the divide between them, they discover that they have a lot to teach each other. That discovery undercuts the prejudices and biases that they may have had about one another.

Churches often contribute space for weekly Circle meetings, and initial training often takes place in churches. In addition, church members can serve as Circle allies.

After a self-assessment, Partners of Hope discovered that, though it was helping people cope with poverty, it did not develop long-term relationships with clients to help them escape entrenched poverty and transform their lives. Allison DeHart convinced the board to launch the Circles campaign in 2007. "It's so simple and yet so profound," DeHart observed.

"In the past, through our other programs and outreach, we had brief encounters with people in poverty," DeHart continued. "But the Circle families are a part of our community, and we're a part of theirs. We've increased their employment, encouraged them to finish their secondary education, and helped empower them to get pay raises and GED degrees. But the biggest gain is in their social capital—the connections and community support that the Circle families have."

"The systems we have—governmental systems and even mercy ministries—don't eliminate poverty," Jerald McKie explained. "My hope would be to have a thousand families lifted out of poverty through the Circles Campaign and to have that accomplishment make some headlines—make a splash! I'm

really impressed with the potential for transformation."

Scott Miller and a colleague, Gary Stokes, founded the Move the Mountain Leadership Center in 1992. A number of anti-poverty strategies followed. In 2007, the center developed Circles and established a partnership with aha! Process, Inc, the organization of Dr. Rubye Payne, author

of Bridges Out of Poverty.

At the Summit in Conover, NC, Miller summed up the motivation behind the Circles Campaign in just five words: "Poverty is immoral and unnecessary."

Mary Beth Coudal is staff writer for the General Board of Global Ministries.

CIRCLES™ Campaign Expanding

by Elliott Wright

Move the Mountain Leadership Center, the originator of the Circles™ Campaign, was organized in 1992 with a long-term grant from the Annie E. Casey Foundation. It was originally founded by Scott Miller and Gary Stokes. Two years ago, Circles joined forces with Dr. Rubye Payne, author of important books on understanding and alleviating poverty. Move the Mountain, headquartered in Ames, Iowa, has the goal of helping people become economically self-sufficient and, thereby, eliminating poverty in the United States.

Circles has a network of 40 communities in 18 states, with relatively few in the Southeast. The North Carolina project is seen as a springboard for more Circles sites in that region.

United Methodists are involved or considering involvement in several other locales, including Syracuse, New York, where University United Methodist Church is a program center for a new Circles partnership with Housing Visions Unlimited, which itself grew out of the congregation.

Funds for the North Carolina pilot beyond what Global Ministries and the conference can provide are still being raised from foundations and church sources. A small staff is expected to be in place by July.

Elliott Wright is the information officer of the General Board of Global Ministries.

For more information about Move the Mountain Leadership Center, visit the website: www.movethemountain.org.