

ABOUT BNASAA: Sharing Circles

A sharing circle is a structured form of consultation that has been used to open many BNASAA activities. The opening circle is designed to provide a safe and structured activity to facilitate the sharing of intimate issues and concerns as part of group consultation. The introductory statement explains the overall process and structure of the sharing circle. In addition to those guidelines, facilitators of a sharing circle may wish to consider the following guidelines:

- Have everyone sit in a closed circle with no extra seats and with no one sitting behind anyone else. (If the group is too large for a single closed circle, you may wish to consider dividing the group into two or more groups.)
- Welcome everyone, introduce yourself and read the Introductory Statement to explain the process. Ask if there are any questions or concerns. Then begin with prayers. Pray as long as necessary to give each person an opportunity to feel comfortable. Pray until finished – it sets the tone.
- Begin the sharing with a person who has participated in BNASAA activities or who will open up from the heart easily.
- Have people introduce themselves when they begin to speak.
- During the sharing, if someone forgets about the structure of passing the “object”, gently remind the group that only the person with the “object” has the floor and that there will be further opportunities to share later in the session.
- Time requirements are always a sensitive issue in a sharing circle, particularly if it is being used as an opening circle at the beginning of a workshop. It is our experience that having ample opportunity to speak can be one of the most powerful experiences an individual can have, particularly if this is their first conference. It is also true that it is important to preserve a sense of time structure, particularly for meal times. Given the size of the group, the background of participants and the mix of experience with previous Network activities, you should determine some basic guidelines around how time will be used. Often just raising the issue at the beginning of the circle and asking participants to use their own good judgment will be sufficient.

Introductory Statement for a Sharing Circle

A structure for consultation that was used at the Montréal conference in November 1989, and which has been used at many conferences since then, is the sharing circle. The process is adapted from a Native American process called a talking circle. In a sharing

circle, an object is passed around that allows the person holding the object to speak. In Montréal we used an eagle feather, but we often use a prayer book or some other designated object. The object is very special and gives the person holding it the power to speak.

- Only the person who holds the object has the floor. When you do not hold the object, you may not speak - only listen. This gives everyone an opportunity to speak and listen.
- The object is passed around the circle in order (usually clockwise) since it is less confusing this way. You may pass when it is your turn to speak. You can always have an opportunity to speak later if you wish to.
- If you need to leave feel free to do so in a quiet and courteous manner. Many people may get tired or feel it necessary to leave the discussion for a few minutes. Don't feel you need to explain and feel free to return to the circle at any time.
- Time is often a concern, but we try to avoid setting time limits for individual sharing. If this is your first BNASAA conference, you may find you have a lot to share with the group. If you have been to many conferences you may find your need for sharing is briefer. We can see that from the size of the group and the time allotted for that session that time is limited. But we also know that the sharing circle can often be the most important part of the conference and we don't want to damage that experience by artificial time limits. So we ask each individual to be aware of this issue and to pace their sharing accordingly.
- This is not a confession, but a sharing from the heart. If you feel uncomfortable in any way you do not have to share or participate.
- All sharing is strictly confidential and may not be discussed outside the circle. Our goal is to allow each person to share openly and freely and the principle of confidentiality is essential to maintaining this freedom.
- Are there any questions or concerns? If not, we will begin with prayers and then begin the circle.
- The stated purpose of BNASAA is to explore Bahá'í principles and concepts related to AIDS, human sexuality, addictions, abuse and other challenging personal issues, and to consider questions and concerns that arise in the application of these principles to Bahá'í community development.