

# The People behind Circles of Support

Helen Drewery describes the motivations of volunteers in the Circles of Support and Accountability programme.

**W**hy would anyone volunteer to spend time every week with a convicted sex offender, recently released from prison? I have seen this question in the eyes of many people who have listened to me talk about the Circles of Support and Accountability programme.

The answers to that question are many and various, but it does seem that there are enough ordinary sensible people willing to come forward and commit themselves to the task, for a year in the first instance, so that Circles can be set up for those offenders who are at the highest risk of re-offending.

Circles started in Canada as an immediate response to a crisis and only later became an idea. A man just out of prison was being hounded by the public and the press. How could both the public and the man be kept safe? A local church which had already had some contact with the man rallied round and came up with a group of people who were prepared to provide support, but also to encourage him to live up to his promise that 'there will be no

Some volunteers will go on to join another Circle working with a different core member. In Britain, where the scheme is now being piloted by three organisations with Home Office funding, it is too early to tell whether experiences will be similar, but something like twelve Circles will have been started by the time this article goes to print and some similar patterns are beginning to emerge.

As in Canada, many British volunteers are involved in a church or other faith group – although this could be self-fulfilling, as those recruiting volunteers have tended to put faith groups high on their list of places to look. Others have been approached through their participation in post-graduate social work courses. Some people have unexpectedly offered themselves as possible volunteers when they were contacted as professionals – e.g. people running hostels where likely core members live. And yet others have come in by word of mouth, which is very encouraging.

So why do they do it? The best way to explain is

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more victims at my hands'. That would mean being ready to challenge him, to work intensively with him if there were a crisis, and if the situation became too worrying, to call in the police. But one of the most important elements was the intention to work as a group which included the offender – they began to call him the 'core member' of the group and did their best to take all decisions together.

Eight years down the line, they were still supporting him when I visited that church in early 2002. He had spent most of his life in institutions and will perhaps never be able to live without support. But the crucial thing is that he is not causing harm to children. And across Canada schemes are developing to replicate this model which grew up spontaneously. Training and support mechanisms for volunteers have been devised and research done which shows a reduction by more than half in reconviction rates, compared with predictions for the group of 30 core members studied.

Eight years is a lot longer than most Circles last – in Canada they have found that about half go into a second year and half of those again into a third. Often they wind down gradually, meeting less often as the core member gets better at coping with life outside and begins to build up contacts of his own. Even after the Circle has officially stopped, some former members will often stay in touch informally,

to quote the volunteers themselves.

David Wilson, Professor of Criminal Justice at the University of Central England, interviewed a number of Circles volunteers in Canada while researching for his recently published book *Innocence Betrayed* (2002). Here are some of their words, taken from his final chapter:

"I do it because I firmly believe that I've been blessed in my life and all of us have a responsibility to put back into the community - to give to the community. Sure, I have a faith, and that faith makes me see people – all people – as worthwhile." (A volunteer.)

"We really challenged him about his drinking – he'd go on benders, and then he'd look for kids. We didn't particularly like him, but we had to support him if we were going to make him accountable, and in making him account for this behaviour we were also making the community safer...What we are offering these offenders is a relationship rather than custody. They have never functioned successfully in the community before and they need our help to do so." (A chaplain who is a volunteer.)

"The key thing is the acceptance of that individual as a member of society – a contributing member – not as a paedophile, who has only and will only ever have that label. If you don't let them forget that,



*Peace Garden, Imperial War Museum, London.*

then that's all they will ever be – a paedophile.” (A volunteer who is a police officer in Toronto’s Sexual Assault Squad.)

In Britain, a volunteer has spoken to me about the ‘phenomenal impact’ a Circle had, not only on the core member but also on the volunteers. Another volunteer, quoted by Julia Stuart in an article in *The Independent* last year, found it an invaluable experience.

“It’s hugely rewarding. This is a great opportunity to make a difference in society. If people are worried about sex offenders re-convicting, this is something they can do about it. Rather than burn their house down, or chuck them out, they can actually help put lives back together again, rather than tearing people apart. You share your life, your being and your friendship with somebody who isn’t a monster, just somebody in trouble.”

Although it is important to screen out would-be volunteers who might be tempted to use the Circle as a therapy group for themselves, that does not mean that the benefits gained will all be in one direction. To conclude, here is a longer piece, sent to me by a British volunteer.

“I suffered from abuse as a child. I was attracted to this project because I hoped that it would help me lay some ghosts. In my mind, an abuser is an all-powerful person, with the power to shame me, hurt me, make or break me. I wanted this chance to relate to an abuser as my adult self, with all the skills, experience, knowledge and understanding that I now have. It has been incredibly healing for me to understand, to really

understand, that what happened to me is not my fault. And to be able to share with someone who really needs it that there is another way to live. It has helped me to feel pride in the person I have become, despite everything.”

“My gut feeling is that working in this circle has substantially reduced the likelihood of our core member re-offending. I may be wrong, but I just can’t see him doing it again. To me, as a survivor, that is the greatest reward I can imagine – that other little girls are spared. To my complete surprise, I have also come to really like our core member. It makes me happy to feel that he, too, will be able to live a better life now. It has helped me to see that whatever awful things someone might have done, they still have a human heart beating in their chest.”

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**References:**

Silverman, J. and Wilson, D. (2002), *Innocence Betrayed: paedophilia, the media and society*. Cambridge: Polity Press

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