

Iowa Civil Rights Commission

Study Circles

Vol. I, No. 2

Our Mission is to eliminate discrimination in Iowa. June-July 1997

Sponsoring Coalitions

Des Moines

“Honest Conversations”

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Dubuque “Talk Circles”

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Muscatine “Study Circles”

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Sioux City “Study Circles”

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Sioux City Human Rights Comm.
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Sioux City, IA 51101-1238
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Storm Lake, IA 50588
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Webster County “Study Circles”

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Basic Steps in Creating a Community-wide Study Circle Program

Study circle programs that create opportunities for dialogue across a community require a strong organizing effort. Each community is unique, so the process of creating opportunities for discussion will vary. Typically, one or two organizations in a community (such as a Mayor’s office or an interfaith group) take the lead in making a study circle program happen. The following suggestions represent lessons learned from veterans of community-wide discussions programs:

1. **Build a working group of community leaders** who are committed to open community dialogue on an issue of common concern.
2. **Hold a study circle among your working group.** This will help solidify your collaboration and help your group come to a better understanding of the study circle process and the value of cross-sector dialogue.
3. **Decide how your working group will handle the overall coordination of the program.** That is, decide who will recruit study circle participants and leaders, and how participants, leaders, and sites will be matched.
4. **Identify and recruit sponsors** who can lend their resources and credibility to the program.
5. **Hold a few pilot study circles** among coalition members, to help solidify the commitment of sponsors and to increase their understanding of the process.
6. **Assist sponsors** if they are going to be recruiting study circle organizers from among their colleagues and constituents.
7. **Recruit potential facilitators.** Sometimes the working group can take primary responsibility for this, and sometimes sponsors are asked to help.
8. **Hold a training session for facilitators.** A local college or university, or a human relations organization, might be able to organize this facet of the program.

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Where Are Community-wide Study Circle Programs Going On?

In 1992, Lima, Ohio, became the first city to create a community-wide study circle program. Since then, 30 communities have followed Lima’s lead, ranging in size from Orford, New Hampshire, to Los Angeles, California.

Over 100 other communities are in various stages of planning and organizing community-wide programs. SCRC also collaborates with a number of national organizations that are working with the community-wide study circle model, including the National Crime Prevention Council, the YWCA of the USA, the League of Women Voters, the Education Commission of the States, the National Association of Human Rights Workers, and the Alliance for National Renewal.

In Greater Cleveland, Ohio, the National Conference, the YWCA, and Case Western Reserve were the initiators of the “Honest Conversations” program. Working together with local governments, the National Conference has fostered large-scale study circle programs on race relations in four area communities. Case Western Reserve University has conducted an in-depth program evaluation of the entire program. Contact SCRC for a copy of the report. (Address on page 2)

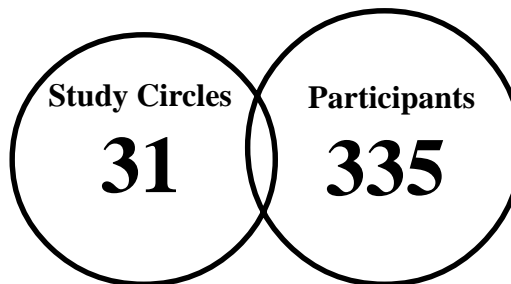
Highlights of Minutes, Statewide Group, May 29, 1997

- Dubuque convened two more “talk circles” in June and they’re busy recruiting participants for fall sessions. The Coalition is running the Lima, Ohio, videotape on cable access television in an effort to spark new interest and help recruit participants.
- Muscatine continues to grow their Coalition, adding new members and identifying people who can perform key organizing functions. The Coalition has approached a local foundation for seed money and plans to hold a “Kick-Off” in the fall.
- Des Moines completed four “public” honest conversations in June, involving people from the community who volunteered to participate. Des Moines is also working with organizations, including the ICRC, to facilitate “private” honest conversations among employees.
- Tama and Dubuque hope to manage their programs with volunteers only. Other Coalitions are seeking financial assistance from corporations and foundations.
- Dubuque and Des Moines are in the process of developing measurement systems to help track the success or progress of study circles on individuals and communities.
- Asking facilitators and participants to help recruit new participants seems to be one of the best ways to fill the seats. Coalitions need to work very hard in getting the word out about study circles, explaining and demonstrating the value and benefits.
- Facilitators need to be absolutely neutral. When they give personal opinions or share personal experiences, they lose their facilitator status and become participants.

9. **Set a range of dates for the full-fledged program** so that all of the study circles in the community will occur more or less within the same time frame.
10. **Hold a “kickoff” event** to broadcast the study circle program. This is an ideal way to generate media coverage and gain greater community visibility. Refer to what transpired in your pilot study circles, and state clearly how and why people should take part in the study circles.
11. **Work with your study circle organizers as they recruit participants.**
12. **Let the study circles begin!**
13. During the study circles, **be available to facilitators and study circle organizers.** After the study circles have been meeting for a couple of sessions, convene the leaders and trainers so that they can share questions, challenges, and ideas with one another.
14. **Hold a community function** at the conclusion of the program. Use this event to inform participants about new and existing action opportunities. It can be a chance for people to reorganize themselves into action groups and new sets of study circles, or to report to officials and community leaders. It is also an important opportunity to celebrate the successes of the program!

For assistance and advice, contact the **Study Circles Resource Center**, 697 Pomfret Street, P.O. Box 203, Pomfret, CT 06258; 860-928-2616, 860-928-3713 FAX; e-mail <scrc@neca.com>

Keeping Count --July 1997



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