

# Iowa Civil Rights Commission

# Study Circles

Vol. I, No. 1

Our Mission is to eliminate discrimination in Iowa. April-May 1997

## Sponsoring Coalitions

### Des Moines

#### “Honest Conversations”

Thea Nietfield or Adin Davis  
P.O. Box 10385  
Des Moines, IA 50306  
515-244-8603

### Dubuque “Talk Circles”

V. Richard Wildermuth  
1441 Bluff  
Dubuque, IA 52001  
319-556-7440

### Muscatine “Study Circles”

Jeff Armstrong  
Muscatine Community College  
152 Colorado Street  
Muscatine, IA 52761  
319-263-8250

### Sioux City “Study Circles”

Richard Hayes or Matt Boley  
Sioux City Human Rights Comm.  
355 Orpheum Electric Bldg.  
Sioux City, IA 51101-1238  
712-279-6985

### Storm Lake “Study Circles”

Dale Carver  
315 Vilas Road  
Storm Lake, IA 50588  
712-732-6767

### Webster County “Study Circles”

Ed O’Leary  
Ft. Dodge/Webster County Human  
Rights Commission  
819 2nd Avenue South  
Ft. Dodge, IA 50501  
515-576-2201

## What is the Study Circles Resource Center?

The Study Circles Resource Center (SCRC) is a nonprofit organization established in 1990 to promote the use of study circles on critical social and political issues. It is funded solely by the Topsfield Foundation, a private, nonprofit, nonpartisan foundation whose mission is to advance deliberative democracy and improve the quality of public life in the United States. SCRC operates by creating study circle organization and discussion materials, distributing those materials free of charge to organizers of community-wide study circle programs, and providing technical assistance.

In 1996, the Iowa Civil Rights Commission (ICRC) learned about the study circles program and saw it as an excellent tool to enlist more communities and individuals in the fight against discrimination in Iowa. The ICRC sees study circles as an extension of, or companion program to, the Community Diversity Appreciations Teams now operating in 16 Iowa communities. But even in communities without teams, other organizations or coalitions can organize study circle programs and gain the participation of many citizens in discussing and resolving important community issues. SCRC has joined with ICRC in providing materials, training and support to launch study circles in Iowa.

The ICRC has also enlisted the support and commitment of a number of individuals around the state to help us lead the Iowa initiative. The Statewide Study Circles Work Group meets monthly, reviews what’s happening throughout Iowa, and advises the ICRC on program issues.

## What is a study circle?

The study circle is a simple process for small-group deliberation. There are just a few defining characteristics:

- A study circle is comprised of **10-15 people** who meet regularly over a period of weeks or months to address a critical public issue.
- A study circle is **facilitated** by a person who is there not to act as an expert on the issue, but to serve the group by keeping the discussion focused, helping the group consider a variety of views, and asking difficult questions.
- A study circle is **open to many perspectives**. The way in which study circle facilitators are trained and discussion materials are written gives everyone “a home in the conversation,” and helps the group explore areas of common ground.
- A study circle progresses from a **session on personal experience** (how does the issue affect me?) to **sessions providing a broader perspective** (what are others saying about the issues) to a **session on action** (what can we do about the issue here?).

## What is a community-wide program?

Study circles can be used in a variety of ways, but most study circles have occurred as part of community-wide programs. These programs engage large numbers -- in some

(over)

## Highlights of Minutes, Statewide Group, April 24, 1997

- Dubuque has completed one talk circle and has five underway. Their first circle has decided to reconvene in the fall and develop an action plan. Volunteers have assumed responsibility for managing the community-wide program.
- Tama-Toledo has just finished their pilot study circle at the middle school, involving students, teachers, and parents. Organizers of that circle hope that the Tama County Team for Intercultural Community takes the lead in managing a Tama Toledo study circles experience.
- Des Moines has secured the help of several organizations who are anxious to employ study circles within their workforce as a diversity initiative. The Des Moines Work Group has recruited and trained more than 30 facilitators and beginning May 21 will kick-off four community "honest conversations."
- Sioux City has completed their pilot study circle and will convene two more circles in early-June.
- ICRC is working to bring Sally Campbell back to Iowa soon to conduct a "Train the Trainer" session for persons who are willing to take responsibility for training facilitators in their communities.

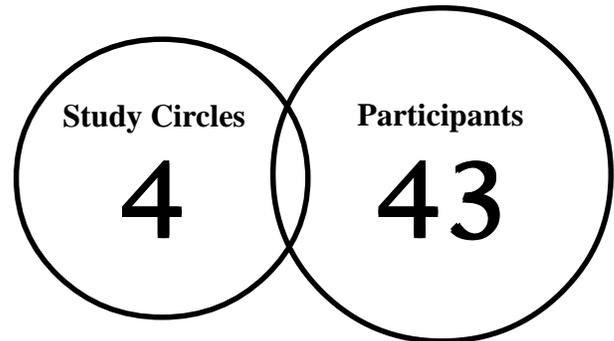
cases thousands -- of citizens in a community in study circles on a public issue such as race relations, crime and violence, or education. The key factor in convincing people to take part in study circles is helping them see that by participating they will actually be making an impact on the issue; through their size and sponsorship, community-wide programs do just that.

What are the outcomes of community-wide study circle programs? By participating in study circles, citizens gain "ownership" of the issues, a recognition that there can be a connection between personal experiences and public policies, and a deeper understanding of their own and others' perspectives and concerns. They discover common ground and a greater desire and ability to work collaboratively to solve local problems -- as individuals, as members of small groups, and as voters and members of large organizations in the community. Community-wide programs also facilitate cooperation between citizens and government.

## How do community-wide study circle programs begin?

Typically, a single organization such as a mayor's office, a school board, a human rights commission, or a diversity appreciation team spearheads and staffs the project. In most communities, the organization begins when the initial organization approaches other key organizations to build a sponsoring coalition. Most community-wide programs have 10 - 13 organizations as sponsors or endorsers, such as churches, neighborhood associations, and clubs.

**Keeping  
Count  
May 1997**



### Iowa Civil Rights Commission

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