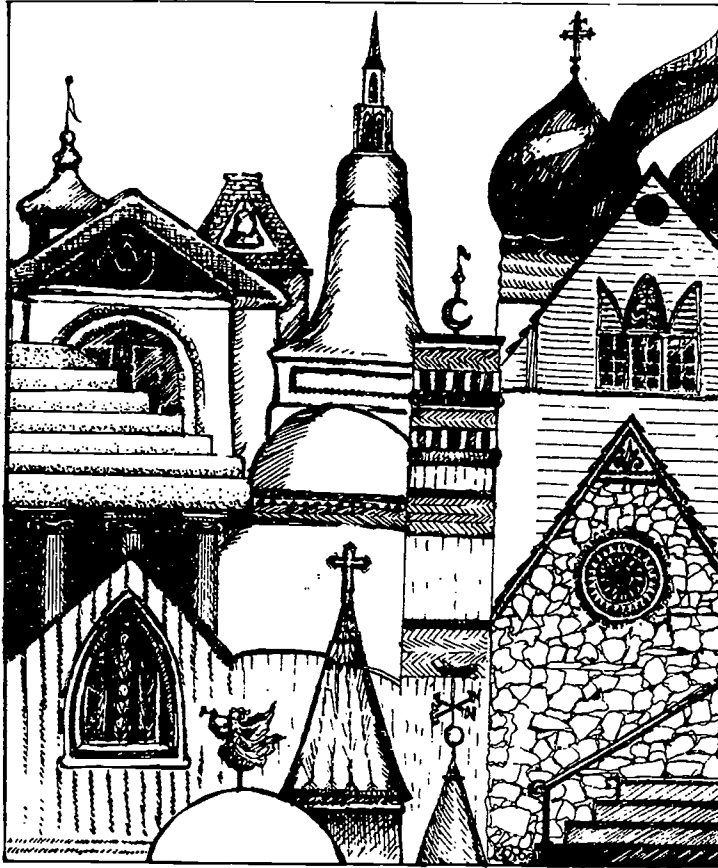


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Study Circles in Paired Congregations
Enriching Your Community Through
Shared Dialogue on Vital Issues

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Study Circles in Paired Congregations: Enriching Your Community Through Shared Dialogue on Vital Issues is a publication of the Study Circles Resource Center (SCRC). SCRC is a project of Topsfield Foundation, Inc., a private, nonprofit, nonpartisan foundation dedicated to advancing deliberative democracy and improving the quality of public life in the United States. SCRC carries out this mission by promoting the use of small-group, democratic, highly participatory discussions known as study circles.

You are welcome to photocopy this publication as needed, or you can order additional copies from SCRC for \$2.00 each, plus \$2.00 per order for shipping and handling. Write or call for information on discounts for large orders.

We encourage you to contact SCRC to tell us how you are using the ideas presented here. If you are organizing a large-scale study circle program among many congregations, or would like to know about other applications of study circles, contact us for additional assistance.

Introduction

This booklet describes how members of paired congregations — from many faiths, traditions, and denominations — are joining together in study circles, a simple form of democratic dialogue that can strengthen congregations and communities. *Study Circles in Paired Congregations* provides the basic guidelines, suggestions, and resources you will need to begin this process.

A study circle is a small group of people (usually from seven to fifteen) who meet together several times to learn in a democratic and collaborative way about a social or political issue. The process does not require special expertise on the issues. Accessible, balanced reading material and neutral discussion leaders help ensure that the discussions are open, respectful of all views, and free of a particular political agenda.

Study circles differ from typical meetings on political issues because they don't have a specific desired outcome — such as an action plan that everyone must agree to. Open dialogue, not consensus, is the goal. People should remain free to explore the values and concerns that underlie

"The study circles benefited our church tremendously. We were paired with St. Charles Catholic Church. Some of our members have developed friendships, and we've done other things together. In fact, we're in the process of developing a covenant with St. Charles, an agreement to work together to benefit the community."

Pastor Lamont Monford
Philippian Baptist Church
Lima, Ohio

different opinions and to respectfully disagree. In the process of the discussions, however, participants often discover common ground and go on to take action based on their new understanding.

Churches and synagogues, civic and community groups, businesses, advocacy organizations, schools, unions, and government agencies have all used study circles to consider vital issues.

Why do congregations join together for these discussions? As with many other programs that pair congrega-

tions (such as pulpit exchanges or joint community projects), a central reason is to build new relationships in the community. Dialogue provides an added depth to meeting new people. Since the discussions last for several sessions, participants often form ongoing personal relationships that are based on genuine understanding and respect.

Organizers of study circles also find that the discussions encourage all kinds of people to become more involved in public life and to develop their leadership skills. Open, democratic discussions welcome everyone, regardless of background, knowledge of the issue, viewpoint, or previous experience. Participants of all political persuasions find study circles a refreshing change from the usual, adversarial form of political discussion. In study circles,

"I have never heard such an overwhelmingly positive response to a program.... The people-to-people component — just getting to know each other — has been thrilling. I have had folks calling me to say how grateful they are for the opportunity.... The program is building long-term relationships."

The Rev. Ann Geer
Director
Council of Churches of
Greater Springfield
Massachusetts

people have the opportunity to develop their own views and connect their own personal and community experiences to public issues. Participants become empowered to "take ownership" of the issues and to stay involved.

Another reason congregations pair for study circles is the realization that their communities are becoming more divided along lines of race and ethnicity, class and economic status, and political beliefs. Joining with another congregation for dialogue is a straightforward way to start bridging these divides. It gives

people a chance to learn with those who have different beliefs and who are from different backgrounds. Participants in the discussions know that they are free to hold their own beliefs as they respectfully explore others' opinions and ideas.

Study circle participants often reach out to include additional members of their congregations in dialogue. In some communities, congregations take dialogue to other sectors of the community, such as businesses, schools, and neighborhood associations. As dialogue builds, action often builds, too, with joint community projects emerging from the study circle participants' new awareness and concern for the issues affecting their community.

We hope that the suggestions in *Study Circles in Paired Congregations*, along with the personal accounts by study circle organizers and participants, will inspire and enable you to create effective discussions in your community.

Overview of a typical study circle

Study circles provide settings that welcome and value everyone's contribution. While groups sometimes meet for just a single session, multiple sessions generate a sense of community and camaraderie within the group.

Typically, the group meets once a week for several weeks, devoting two hours to each session. While there are many ways the study circle can progress, the following structure works well for many groups.

Session 1 — Experiences, perceptions, and personal connections to the issue

The beginning of the first session is usually devoted to setting the ground rules for the discussions. (See Appendix B, "Ground rules for useful discussions.") People need to agree that all views will be respected. They should feel free to bear witness to their religious beliefs and the impact of those beliefs on their ideas, but should understand that the goal is not to win converts to their viewpoints.

Next, participants can talk about their connection to the issue. Leaders guide the discussion using such questions as, "Why are you concerned about this issue?" and "How have your experiences or concerns influenced your opinions about this issue?" All group members should be encouraged to share their perspectives and experiences, though no one should be forced to do so.

Session 2 — Examining different views of the issue

Depending upon the interests of the group and the topic at hand, this session may be devoted to a range of ideas about the nature of the problem and its root causes, or about different public policy approaches.

To ensure that all the views are on the table for discussion, leaders sometimes ask participants to role play a view that they don't hold. The most important questions for guiding the discussion are: "What are the genuine concerns that underlie this view?" and "What experiences and beliefs might lead decent and caring people to support that point of view?" To help the group get a sense of the complexity of the issue, participants should also explore the tradeoffs that are inherent in their own views.

Session 3 — Looking at the issue from faith perspectives

Participants need the opportunity to talk about the aspects of their own religious faith and practice that have an impact on the issue. Many paired congregations focus on readings from scripture or other key texts during this session. In this way, people have a chance to reflect on alternative views of the issue from the vantage point of their faith traditions. They'll also be able to identify areas where key values may be in tension with each other.

Session 4 — What can we do?

Many paired congregations talk about ideas for social action at the end of the study circle. Readings may describe examples of effective action in other communities, or contain research gathered by the group about what is already happening in their own community. While there should be no pressure for group members to agree on one course of action, this session gives people the chance to talk about ideas for making a difference in their circles of family and friends, in their congregations, and in the larger community.

The key ingredients of effective discussion in paired congregations

An issue of mutual concern

Almost any issue can be addressed in a study circle, but people are more likely to become involved in the discussions if the issue is one that touches their daily lives. Study circles are almost certain to be a success when participants know that they can make a difference simply by engaging in dialogue. The issue of race relations is ideal by these standards, and has been the topic for discussion in many study circles. On any public issue, however, open dialogue is vital for a deeper understanding of the issue and for more effective action. Congregations have paired for fruitful discussions of crime and violence in the community; poverty and welfare; education and schools; and youth issues.

A desire to learn from different views and experiences

Most religious institutions routinely take policy stands which are formulated by the denomination or another body of religious governance. At the same time, many religious organizations recognize that most of their members are not involved in public issues.

Traditionally, congregations have dealt with this by informing their members about the institution's position on the issues and urging them to join in social action. To supplement this approach and to involve a larger number of members in public issues, a growing number of denominations, interfaith groups, and congregations are using study circles. In this way, members have the chance to consider a broad range of views, develop their own ideas, and discover their personal connection to the issue — and thus gain real "ownership" of the issue.

The study circle process also helps to counter a common tendency to discuss issues only with those whose views are similar to our own. On issues where beliefs are strongly held, it can be difficult to know how to begin a civil conversation. This happens much more easily in the study circle setting, where people have agreed to explore ideas rather than to try to change each other's minds. A willingness to hear other points of view leads to a deeper understanding of the issue and of one's own views. It also contributes to an understanding of others that goes beyond labels and stereotypes.

Of course, different paired congregations will have varying ideas about what constitutes a reasonable range of views. When you are in doubt, err on the side of including a wide range, to give as many people as possible "a place at the table." As one study circle organizer said, "Be prepared to realize that there are more views on a given issue than you ever imagined."

Accessible discussion materials

Brief reading materials can provide basic background information and discussion questions that frame each discussion session. Some study circles use videos as discussion starters.

Study circle organizers put together discussion materials in a variety of ways. Some use readings designed specifically for discussion. Some adapt or supplement these, or even write their own. A quick way to develop the materials is to photocopy newspaper or magazine articles and write some discussion questions for each session. In addition, some study circles include scriptural readings, prayers, reflections, or other faith-based literature in their discussion materials. (See Appendix A, "Additional resources.")

Whether you use prepared discussion materials or develop your own, keep in mind the following suggestions:

- Do your homework: research and define the issue.
- Inform the participants: provide basic information.
- Personalize the issue: incorporate people's concerns into the material.
- Organize the materials: divide the issue into manageable pieces for the discussion.
- Encourage diversity: incorporate a variety of views into the material.
- Get at what motivates people: call attention to the values that underlie people's opinions and concerns.
- Stimulate interaction: develop thought-provoking discussion questions.
- Try it out: organize a discussion group to test the material.

Effective discussion leaders

Good discussions leaders are critical to successful study circles. They set the tone for respect, civility, and open exploration of ideas among the group members. When you are recruiting leaders for your study circle program, look for people who have experience in leading meetings and who know how to help people listen to each other.

A leader doesn't have to be an expert on the issue the group is discussing, but should be conversant with basic information and the range of opinions on the topic. Much more important than knowledge of the issue is the leader's willingness to withhold his or her own views in order to advance an open discussion among group members.

Following are some basic guidelines for effective discussion leadership:

- Set a relaxed, open, and collaborative tone for the discussions.
- Remain neutral; your views should not enter into the discussions.
- Help the group establish clear ground rules. Suggest several ground rules and ask the group members for their consent and input. Appendix B, "Ground rules for useful discussions," provides a useful starting point. In advance of your first meeting, you can give participants a sense of the dialogue by sending them

copies of Appendix C, "Comparison of dialogue and debate" and Appendix D, "Rights, responsibilities, and skills of dialogue."

- Be aware of group dynamics. Help group members talk with each other instead of with you. Monitor how the participants are communicating with each other — who has spoken, who hasn't spoken, and whose points haven't yet been examined.
- Help participants consider a wide range of views, along with the values and experiences that underlie different views.
- Help participants identify common ground, but don't force consensus.
- Summarize the discussion occasionally or, better yet, ask group members to do so.
- Bring closure to each discussion session. Give the group time to reflect on how the discussion went, what they learned, and how they want to carry out the next session. At the end of the final session, give people a chance to reflect on the study circle experience, and to think about actions they will take as individuals or as part of a group. No one should be pressured to support a particular plan of action, but study circle organizers and leaders may give participants the opportunity to join a follow-up "Discussion to Action" group.

Basic steps in organizing the study circles

In the simplest form, religious leaders of two congregations agree to organize a study circle about an issue of mutual concern. They decide on reading material, select a discussion leader or co-leaders (often clergy serve in this role at first), arrange the meetings, and recruit participants from their memberships. Lay leaders are often involved in the organizing, but active support from clergy is essential. The most effective organizers, whether clergy or lay, help their congregations "own" participation in the study circles.

There are many ways to build a diversity of experiences and beliefs into the discussions. Congregations from different religions, or from different Christian denominations, may pair for dialogue. Often, congregations with members from different racial or ethnic backgrounds seek out one another. Another fruitful basis for pairing is to bring together congregations or parishes from the same denomination, but located in different areas — for example, one from an urban neighborhood with one from a suburban neighborhood.

Many congregations pair as part of a larger, community-wide program of study circle dialogue which involves many congregations and other organizations in the community. The initiative for such a community-wide program usually comes from a local council of churches or interfaith council, from a local clergy association, or from a coalition of churches and community groups.

Pairs are not the only possible arrangement. In Springfield, Massachusetts, three churches formed a study circle "triad," bringing together African-Americans, European-Americans, and Hispanic-Americans. In Lexington, Kentucky, a dozen downtown churches pooled study circle participants so that each group would represent several congregations.

Organizing a study circle between two congregations

- Meet with someone you'd like to work with and propose a joint study circle between your two congregations. If you have reading material in mind, share it.
- If you or your partner are lay members of your congregations, seek the support of your religious leader(s).
- Determine the progression of sessions, and select or develop the reading material and discussion questions.

- Select a discussion leader or leaders.
- Decide when the discussion sessions will take place.
- Recruit participants. Face-to-face invitations or phone calls are most effective. Appeals from the pulpit and in bulletins help.
- Consider alternating meeting sites for the study circle sessions so that both congregations can play the role of host.
- You may wish to celebrate your dialogue by having dinner together after the final session.

Organizing a larger study circle program involving many congregations

- Work with or create a working group of clergy that is committed to fostering dialogue. It's best if this core group is broadly representative of your community.
- Hold a pilot study circle among this core group.
- Hold a kickoff event to introduce the study circle process to other congregations and to seek their participation in the program. For example, invite each congregation to commit to recruiting a discussion leader and fifteen participants.
- Train the discussion leaders.
- Pair the congregations, or organize participants in some other way that ensures the kind of diversity you are seeking in the discussions.
- Set a range of dates for the full program so that all the study circles are going on at roughly the same time.
- Hold a meeting for discussion leaders about half-way through the study circle sessions, so that they can share reactions, challenges, and ideas with each other.
- Give participants an opportunity to communicate their ideas and concerns to the larger community.
- Celebrate your accomplishment! Hold a concluding event for study circle participants and friends.

Clergy and lay leaders talk about their study circle programs

We asked people who played key roles in study circles in several different communities to tell their stories in their own words. The programs they talk about range in scale from a single study circle involving two churches to a two-year initiative that has involved scores of congregations, several faiths, and over a thousand participants.

Springfield, Massachusetts

Paired congregations discuss racism and race relations

Springfield (population 157,000) experienced rapid demographic changes in the 1980s, accompanied by a deterioration in racial and ethnic relations. In the spring of 1995, members of more than a dozen congregations participated in study circles using SCRC's discussion manual, *Can't We All Just Get Along?* Now the churches and other community groups are preparing to begin study circles using SCRC's *Confronting Violence in Our Communities*.

The Rev. Ann Geer, Director Council of Churches of Greater Springfield

"The racial difficulties came to a head when an Hispanic school committee member said publicly that racism was a disease of white America. This statement brought condemnation, outrage, and calls for her resignation. For a few weeks, it seemed everyone was focused on the issue of racism.

"This incident created a 'grace moment,' a special opportunity. The local newspaper took advantage of it and came out with a lot of articles about racism in Springfield. The newspaper and others planned a major citywide conference, called a 'racial unity summit.'

"My initial plans were to have a number of our congregations in dialogue, study, and discussion using SCRC's manual. I thought it made sense to start in our own constituency and be confessional first and prophetic later — admit that churches are not above or beyond issues of racism.

"I talked with the SCRC staff and had conversations with internal groups in our organization — members of the Board, our Community Ministry, and

Ecumenical and Interfaith divisions. Then I started looking for congregations that might want to get involved. When I had enough expressions of interest we did an all-day training led by SCRC. After that, I tried to make personal contact with each person who had attended. Then we made the matches between congregations.

"We have had several paired congregations (multiethnic and interfaith) as well as a circle made up of parish religious educators. Now that the formal program is over, all the study circles are struggling with how to continue. It has evolved into socializing for several groups, dinners together and other sharing. We will be commencing anti-violence study circles in June. My long-term plans are to start circles that are community-based by training leaders from the congregations.

"As the bridge person in this program, I had the excitement of an absolutely overwhelming response. Leaders and participants have related to me their great enthusiasm about the series. I have been so touched and moved by the response.... To receive everybody's joy has been wonderful.

"Without question the study circles program has helped the Council with our mission. There have been so many ways we've tried to help folks overcome barriers, and this one really works! Lives were being changed by the person-to-person contact. This is the only program where I've seen that happen so immediately.

"We reaped a real sense of gratitude for bringing people together. Now we have in place a fantastic core of people who, when it's necessary to be reactive, we'll be able to count on. Friendships have been established and there are solid commitments to work together to continue to overcome racism in our communities."

Maryann Teixeira Interracial Bible Study Group The First Church in Ludlow (United Church of Christ)

"The group was formed by our own Rev. Baxter and Rev. Hugh Bair of Springfield Church of God and consisted of six people from each church. We conducted five meetings in which we discussed, through Bible passages, our experiences, perceptions and beliefs; the prevalence and power of racism; changing racist attitudes; and public policies for ending race-based injustice.

"In our final meeting, we held a potluck supper and concentrated on where we would go forward to help. The group considered the possibilities of continuing the monthly meetings, taking our group 'on the road' as ambassadors to other churches, forming a panel discussion that travels to larger groups in the church and the community, concentrating on the youth, and starting groups with new people in other churches.

"In experiencing the issues with God at our sides, there was an amazing change of perceptions and emotions that formed a bond between each and every one of us we will never forget. The group has become close and we have found a new respect and love for each other."

The Rev. Hugh Bair Springfield Church of God

"What made me want to do this was to break down the walls of discrimination, break down myths and stereotypes, deepen understanding of each other's racial background, and bring healing and reconciliation.

"I had been talking with Reverend Baxter about doing a Bible study group together. Then I was invited to a meeting at the Council of Churches and they introduced the SCRC workbook, *Can't We All Just Get Along?* The very title itself aroused my interest. It all connected and we blended some Bible study passages with the workbook for our study circle.

"The experience was one of honest sharing, a moving experience. My people were so full. They live this, they walk it, they talk it. It wasn't difficult for them to draw on their experience, their pain, and to share how they felt. Some of Rev. Baxter's people were awakened as they heard experiences of racial discrimination that my people had experienced in housing, employment, walking into a store and being treated as a potential shoplifter even though they were dressed as professionals.

"One of the benefits was the freedom to 'cathart.' We felt so relaxed that my people could really tell their story. Rev. Baxter's people were kind enough to let my people speak without holding judgment.

"I think we were modeling change, rather than just talking about it. We were able to create a theology of hope. It's been said that the 11 o'clock hour on Sunday mornings is perhaps the most segregated hour in America. We were able to develop some deep commitments in terms of relationship building. What we have today are chocolate cities and vanilla suburbs. We were trying to cross over, mix, and create something, hopeful that there will be a better day."

The Rev. Ledyard Baxter The First Church in Ludlow (UCC)

"I wanted to do this program for a number of reasons. To keep on working on overcoming my own racism and prejudice. To continue in the spirit of previous interracial friendships and experiences. Because of a need to understand and appreciate more fully the reality of discrimination for blacks and other minorities. Because of a sense of urgency and the social relevance of developing interracial fellowship in a violent and divided society. Because of an interest in overcoming the gap between cities and suburbs. A study circle program with a partner church seemed like a way to open up a more personal and deliberate interracial dialogue.

"I had met Rev. Dr. Hugh Bair in the context of the Hartford Seminary Doctor of Ministry Program. Hugh and I shared bag lunches at each other's churches a few times, swapping stories about our families, our parishes, and our visions.

"For our study circle, we used pretty much a hand-picked group from both churches — those we knew we could count on or who were key leaders.

"What was it like? A wonderfully warm and encouraging experience. There was real honesty in the telling of stories by those who had experienced discrimination. There was freedom to disagree or to challenge another's perception of reality. There was heated but friendly discussion. There was consciousness raising for whites about discrimination against blacks, and assurance for blacks that there are at least some whites who are interested in them as individuals and as equals.

"How did this affect our church? I think it gave new validity to an assumption about our identity, that we are a church that cares about people and issues beyond ourselves. A number of people outside the group seemed interested and appreciative."

The Rev. Willard Cofield Alden Baptist Church

"As a board member of the Council of Churches, I participated in the Council's study circle with clergy from many congregations. When they called member churches and asked them to do study circles, I agreed. Rabbi Shapiro was in that study group too.

"I recruited six members from my congregation. I wanted them to visit Sinai Temple and get a chance to see another religion. Also there was the race issue. There's been a lot of tension between blacks and Jews, especially around Louis Farrakhan. I thought it would be good to join in dialogue.

"Mark (Rabbi Shapiro) and I sat down before the first session to outline what we would do. The two of us facilitated the discussions. People really had things to say, and we covered less material than we had anticipated. As the leader, it felt good. The program went so well, maybe because Rabbi Shapiro and I knew each other before the study circle.

"People felt it was worthwhile and enjoyed it. We had six sessions and we will be having a follow-up meeting to decide where to go from here and to plan another study circle for the fall. Rabbi Shapiro and I will each pick a leader for this. We are also considering a joint service or a combined youth group meeting.

"I went into the program thinking I wouldn't have the time and energy for it. But the energy kind of motivated itself. Once you present the material, the participants really get into it. I said, 'Wow. I can really see this producing something else.' After you see the reactions, the energy just comes."

Rabbi Mark Shapiro Sinai Temple

"What made me want to do this was a tremendous concern for what's happening in America. We are so divided by racism.... I thought that if we are going to be part of the solution then we'd better do something.... The problem is that nobody knows where to begin.... Where do you start? When Ann Geer said here's a way to start personally, a way to get to know other people, African-Americans, and to look at your own self, I jumped at it....

"We have a Social Action Committee that meets fairly regularly. I went to them and asked if they were interested and they said yes. We had done a worship and meal exchange two years ago with another black congregation. I contacted members of my own synagogue who had been involved in that exchange.

"Rev. Cofield and I had lunch together and planned the program. We decided to be co-facilitators of the discussions. Organizing the study circle was easier than it looks. It was not even hard to get people, despite the fact that our members are busy and that it would be natural to have some anxiety about participating in a dialogue with people one doesn't know who are different. The hardest parts were finding the dates for the meetings and actually getting myself to make the recruiting phone calls.

"The program really took care of itself. People went right along with the discussion guide. There was very little to do as facilitators. The people from my congregation had all had experience with discussions.

"The most important benefit of the program was the opportunity to meet and talk — real people talking to

real people about real life. I believe it broke down significant stereotypes."

Lima, Ohio

Churches launch community-wide study circles on race and on violence

Lima is a small city of 46,000 in northwest Ohio with an African-American population of about 25%. When racial tensions heightened in the summer of 1992, Mayor David Berger called on the clergy of the city to take leadership in healing the divisions. The Mayor's Office, The Ohio State University at Lima, and a multi-racial Clergy Task Force then teamed up to initiate study circles on race relations. About 40 churches paired for the initial round of discussions. The religious community's discussions were so effective in creating new relationships and alliances that subsequent rounds of study circles expanded to include the business community, neighborhood associations, and schools.

Today, the churches are once again taking the lead in building bridges and fostering dialogue, this time on the issue of violence. The first round of study circles on that issue have led to new after-school programs, mentoring programs, and new ties with community policing.

The Rev. Greta Wagner, Chaplain St. Rita's Medical Center

"The mayor asked clergy to make a plea for peace in our community. I did not recognize the profound, long-term impact this moment would have upon me pastorally and professionally, nor that this event would spark significant change in the Lima community.

"We realized that participants in our three clergy groups did not know each other well. A diversified, inclusive Clergy Task Force was formed. Through our initial meetings, we quickly perceived that racism was a real but silent and often-ignored issue.

"The City of Lima and The Ohio State University at Lima, with assistance from SCRC, joined with the churches and introduced the *Can't We All Just Get Along?* study circles process in 40 churches. About 800 people participated. Since that time this program has brought folks together to sit down and talk together in two additional rounds of church gatherings as well as in the business, neighborhood, and school sectors.

Currently, the study circles program *Confronting Violence in Our Communities* is ongoing in 49 churches.

"Facilitating study circles and teaching facilitators have been 'grace experiences' as new leaders and friendships have emerged. The inclusion of women in ministry in some traditionally male clergy settings has produced positive relationships among us as colleagues in the community. Exhilarating and stretching partnerships between pastors and laity from diverse backgrounds have been fostered through shared speaking engagements at press conferences, meetings, talk shows, and interviews. Presenting workshops about 'the Lima experience' to denominational and educational groups in Detroit and Chicago has been especially fulfilling for me.

"A few critics have challenged that study circles are 'just talk' but the people of Lima have proven otherwise. 'Talk' has turned to 'walk' in a variety of follow-up endeavors, including our 'Discussion to Action' group. This business-based gathering has grown into a broad coalition effort ... and I continue to rejoice that we are people blessed to 'get along' and to learn together, growing in our awareness of the good already achieved and all that is yet to be accomplished."

Pastor Lamont Monford Philippian Baptist Church

"After the Rodney King verdict, the mayor pointed out that there was no true fellowship across racial boundaries amongst ministers in the community. I believe that for change to occur in our communities, the example must be set by the church. If we are going to preach the gospel of harmony, we need to make ourselves harmonious first.

"After the racism study circles, our pastor's group was discussing what to do next. I was one of many who were interested in talking about violence. There seemed to be a meeting of the minds. We felt a sincere charge from God to do something as a community. Violence affects everyone. It doesn't discriminate — white, black, rich, poor.

"To present the idea to all the Lima metro-area religious leaders, we held a breakfast conference. There were speakers who talked about different kinds of violence. About 50-70 people came. We presented the idea of doing a second round of study circles, this time on violence. It was well-received by all of the pastors.

"I felt the need for study circles on preventing violence probably more so than most of the people in Lima. I am a victim of violence. My mother was murdered 14 years ago. The only thing we know is that she was murdered by a white man. From the racial standpoint, the study circles were helpful because they connected me with white people who care.

"For me, it was like a breath of fresh air. For too long, the community has been in a passive stance on many of the issues that gravely affect us. I was encouraged by the interest in the community in taking a more aggressive stance. The study circles showed me that everyone is affected by violence and everyone is concerned. I needed to hear that because of my mother's murder. She died 14 years ago but I deal with it every day. Helping to organize this program was a way to release my agony and help prevent other people's mothers from getting killed.

"The study circles benefited our church tremendously. We were paired with St. Charles Catholic Church. Some of our members have developed friendships with members of the other church, and we've done other things together. In fact, we're in the process of developing a covenant with St. Charles, an agreement to work together to benefit the community. We hope it will set an example for other churches.

"What's important is that we understand that what we're trying to do won't happen overnight, but we're in it for the long haul. We're hoping that what we are doing now will make a difference over the years."

Lexington, Kentucky

Twelve downtown churches "pool" for dialogue on race relations

Lexington, located in central Kentucky, has a metropolitan area of about 240,000 people. About 13% are African-American and almost all the rest white. Three organizations worked together to develop this program. The primary organizer was the Race Relations Committee of the downtown Christian Unity Task Force (CUTF).

Ray Ranta First United Methodist Church

"The Task Force was exploring several possible programs when Priscilla Jackson, Social Justice Advocate for the Christian Church in Kentucky (Disciples of Christ), proposed that we consider sponsoring a dialogue program between the member congregations. She suggested SCRC's *Can't We All Just Get Along?* At the same time, one of the Task Force ministers, Rev. Carol Rawls, mentioned that the Lexington Commission on Race Relations had suggested that churches try potluck suppers to bring predominantly black and white congregations together.

"We decided to embrace both concepts and ask the Commission to cosponsor a potluck supper. The

Study Circles in Paired Congregations

churches would invite six members each to attend. The purpose of the evening was to have fellowship and to think about creating a dialogue program. About 60 people attended the supper. Priscilla Jackson led a dialogue activity, and 50 people signed up.

"Realizing the need to capture the enthusiasm of the moment, the three sponsoring organizations organized five race relations dialogue groups within five weeks. Each church was given the goal of recruiting six persons. Matching people with nights they could meet, selecting a good racial and denominational mix, as well as identifying 10 facilitators — one white, one black for each group — and training them, was no small task. All of the groups had from five to eight churches represented. Priscilla Jackson trained the facilitators and the four predominantly black churches offered to host the groups.

"The five groups met for four weeks. Ironically, the groups began the same week that racial unrest surfaced in the city as a result of the fatal shooting of a black youth by a white police officer. The media coverage following this incident focused on groups in the city which were involved in race relations, and many people became aware that a group of 12 downtown churches were involved with a race relations dialogue program. In addition, when the shooting occurred, many persons, wondering what to do, learned that one group did have a program where understanding between races was being attempted.

"It was a privilege to be a part of this team effort to help build better understanding between races in our community. The response of the 54 participants was overwhelmingly positive, as was the response of some 70 participants who were involved in April and May of this year."

Julia Martin East Second Street Christian Church

"This particular study circle came as an outgrowth of a group of area churches participating in worship exchanges. After the worship exchange, we wanted to get together and discuss issues of particular concern. Since the church group was made up of white and black churches of various denominations, race relations seemed to be a natural for better understanding and dialogue.

"How to evaluate such an experience can only be measured by individuals over time and by life effect.... The greatest benefit to me has been a heightened sensitivity to the differences in cultural orientation, but even more so to the similarities in our dreams, aspirations, and desire to rise to a higher level of humanity in day-to-day living."

Gloria Tompkins Historic Pleasant Green Missionary Baptist Church

"My experience at first was as a participant and it was gratifying: ... working in discussion classes and attending forums where it was safe for people of all colors to talk. Some of the fear we have about race relations was lessened.

"After attending a Study Circle Conference in Lima, Ohio, I shared information with our Mayor, Pam Miller; my pastor, Dr. T. H. Peoples, Jr.; and the organization for which I work, the Lexington Commission on Race Relations. I and Rev. Stewart Peoples were given the opportunity to share with our church family. This program benefited our church in that we have become more involved, with 10-15 members sharing in the dialogue.

"Many cooperative programs now exist among the downtown churches, including the second phase of the race relations dialogue. Church leaders are meeting regularly to find new ways to avert more violence and to create jobs for youths in the summer.

"The lasting effect on me is sharing and meeting new people who are different. But most enlightening was being selected and trained to be a facilitator. This ... has been an experience that I will never forget.... I do feel that the ministers and congregations could be a tremendous help in bringing about racial harmony in their communities."

Charles Coyle Central Christian Church

"As a member of the Christian Unity Task Force (CUTF), I am very interested in programs that will bring the church congregations into closer contact with each other. We need to know each other better and to understand the many ways that we are united in the church of Jesus Christ as one body.

"The congregations developed better communications with other Christians in other churches and with other racial groups. When we held the celebration of the completion of the dialogue groups with another potluck supper, you could see the persons who had made some new friends and those who had appreciated the opportunity to meet and learn of each other's perspectives on how we are alike as well as how we are different.

"Race relations is a topic that will not go away, nor will it be resolved by one-shot dialogues. Each year a new crop of persons in the congregations needs this type of dialogue. If we can make it a permanent part of our activities, then our entire church community will benefit."

Red Bluff, California

**Two churches pair in a
small rural town**

Red Bluff is a community of approximately 13,000 in Northern California. Many people are employed by service industries and the county government, with considerable unemployment due to the slowdown in the lumber industry. The community is mostly white, with a significant number of Latinos.

**The Rev. Susan Plucker
St. Peter's Episcopal Church**

"As a member of our Diocesan Church in the World Commission, I volunteered to use SCRC's *Can't We All Just Get Along?* discussion manual as a pilot program. The Methodist pastor and I had already been in dialogue on this issue so it just seemed natural to ask her to join me. By working together we could distribute the work load, insure greater participation, and give our congregations a chance to get to know each other better.

"The Methodist Church is the larger of the two congregations, but they are similar in many ways. Both have a high percentage of older people, but are quite involved in the community. The overwhelming majority in both congregations is Anglo.

"The sessions ran for five weeks and were publicized in the bulletins and newsletters. We had 11 participants. As joint leader, I found the study circle format easy to work with. We supplemented each session with prayer and appropriate scripture reflections.

The participants' response to the materials was also positive. This joint educational experience was the first

for our congregations. I have hopes of working again soon with the new Methodist pastor and perhaps including another congregation.

"Perhaps most beneficial is that participants were given a safe setting in which to share their expectations, thoughts, opinions, frustrations, and dreams about this controversial and painful reality of our culture — even in 'our little town.'

"Studying social problems together and struggling to determine a realistic Christian response can work to the benefit of the entire community. We so often feel overwhelmed. As Christian congregations we need and should encourage each other's support."

**Karen Jones
First United Methodist Church**

"Rev. Plucker of St. Peter's and my minister at the time, Sharon Kennedy, were trying to get some healing space and to find people who are concerned about racism. They wanted people who could be a healing presence in the community. There has been increasing racial tension in our area.

"The discussions were being held at our church, and I decided to go. There were more people from St. Peter's than from our church. It was very structured, which helps when people are talking about difficult issues. It felt very safe. We never got excited about not having a lot of people. There was no pressure to say things that people didn't feel comfortable saying.

"For me personally, it was really interesting. There were teachers and public health professionals who are directly impacted by the Latino community. I met people who cared, some with relatives from other races so they are more sensitive to issues of racism. It was a good thing to meet with other people who want to help. You do learn. You get new information. Some of your feelings or fears get reassessed."

Appendix A

Additional resources

"How-to" guides on church pairing and on study circles

—*Domestic Sister Churches: Pairing congregations of different racial/ethnic backgrounds* is a superb 24-page booklet with detailed suggestions and stories of successful partnerships. It is published by the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America, which has been encouraging partnerships between congregations since 1988. Contact the Baptist Peace Fellowship, 499 Patterson Street, Memphis, TN 38111, (901) 324-7675.

—*The Study Circle Handbook: A Manual for Study Circle Discussion Leaders, Organizers, and Participants* presents the fundamentals of study circles. *A Guide to Training Study Circle Leaders* contains all the information in the *Handbook*, plus an outline for a 4½ hour basic training program, with variations for both shorter and longer programs. These resources are \$2.00 each, plus \$2.00 per order for shipping and handling. Contact the Study Circles Resource Center (SCRC), PO Box 203, Pomfret, CT 06258, (860) 928-2616.

—*Guidelines for Creating Effective Study Circle Material* provides guidelines for creating written material for study circles. It is available for \$2.00, plus \$2.00 per order for shipping and handling, from the Study Circles Resource Center (SCRC), PO Box 203, Pomfret, CT 06258, (860) 928-2616.

SCRC's discussion materials on specific issues

The Study Circles Resource Center (SCRC) publishes a range of issue materials that have been used successfully by paired-congregation study circles. The community-wide discussion guides include:

—*Can't We All Just Get Along? A Manual for Discussion Programs on Racism and Race Relations* (a five-session discussion program including recommendations for tailoring the discussions to a particular community or organization's concerns; 2nd ed. 1994, 42 pages).

—*Confronting Violence in Our Communities: A Guide to Public Dialogue and Problem-Solving* (a four-session discussion program examining how violence

affects our lives, what causes violence, and what can be done in communities and in schools; 1994, 36 pages).

—*Education: How Can Schools and Communities Work Together to Meet the Challenge?* (a multiple-session discussion program examining the challenges schools face and the ways in which citizens and educators can improve education; 1995, 40 pages).

—*In Harm's Way: When Should We Risk American Lives in World Conflicts?* (a four-session program examining what circumstances, if any, justify US military intervention around the world; 1994, 40 pages).

Each of these guides includes suggestions for organizing and leading study circles, and lists of helpful resources. The guides are \$5.00 each (\$3.00 each for ten or more of a single title), plus \$2.00 per order for shipping and handling. Contact SCRC, PO Box 203, Pomfret, CT 06258, (860) 928-2616.

Other sources of discussion materials

Check with the national office of your denomination or faith about discussion materials they may be able to provide. Also contact the Study Circles Resource Center for a copy of its clearinghouse list, which describes discussion programs published by a variety of organizations. Other publishers of discussion material:

The National Issues Forums (NIF) publishes a wide range of discussion materials on national policy issues. These guides have been used in both small groups and large forums. For more information, contact NIF, 100 Commons Road, Dayton, OH 45459-2777, (800) 433-7834. To order the guides, contact Kendall/Hunt Publishing Co., (800) 338-3987.

The National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, together with the Presbyterian Church and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, has published *Thinking and Working Together: Study and Action Suggestions for Jewish and Christian Congregations*. This 20-page booklet contains three different modules that combine reflection and action in a discussion format, with texts from the Christian and Hebrew scriptures. \$1.00 per copy from Working Group on Interfaith Relations, NCCC, 475 Riverside Drive, Room 870, New York, NY 10115, (212) 870-2560.

Sojourners, an ecumenical Christian community and magazine, has published two resources for discussion. *America's Original Sin: A Study Guide on White Racism* was designed for groups wanting "to deal more deeply with both overt racism and the more subtle institutional racist attitudes and practices in American society." It examines: the roots of racism in American history and the life of the church; the economic, political, and violent manifestations of racism today; and stories of how individuals have confronted racism in themselves, their church, and their society. *Who Is My Neighbor? Economics As If Values Matter*, which incorporates material from the Study Circles Resource Center (SCRC), combines theory and practice to provide an opportunity for people to explore economic alternatives that are rooted in values and community. It applies basic principles such as "use only what we need" to an analysis of the economic system. Contact Sojourners, 2401 Fifteenth St. NW, Washington, DC 20009, (202) 328-8842.

The California Council of Churches has published *A Vision of Wholeness*, a five-session group project curriculum which deals with the complex issues and policy options involved in health care reform. It connects the political choices to personal values and experiences. Contact CCC, 1300 N Street, Sacramento, CA 95814, (916) 442-5447.

The National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) sponsors the *National Conversation on American Pluralism and Identity*, an "opportunity for Americans of all backgrounds to study, learn, and speak face-to-face about the diversity of race, ethnicity, and culture that enriches our country and about the values that we share as Americans." NEH has published a *Resource Kit* for these conversations which includes a handbook of discussion tips; a selection of important historical documents; essays by scholars; conversation starters; and a list of suggested readings and films. For a free copy of the kit, contact NEH, The National Conversation, Washington, DC 20506, (800) NEH-1121.

Suggested readings

Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies, World Council of Churches Publications, revised 1990. To order, contact: WCC, 150 rue de Ferney, 1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland.

Daniel F. Romero, *Our Futures Inextricably Linked: A Vision of Pluralism*, United Church Board for Homeland Ministries, 1994. To order, contact: UCBHM Distribution Center, 700 Prospect Ave. East, Cleveland, OH 44115-1100.

Raleigh Washington and Glen Kehrein, *Breaking Down Walls: A Model for Reconciliation in an Age of Racial Strife*. Moody Press, Chicago, 1993.

Appendix B

Ground rules for useful discussions

Whether you are talking with close friends or casual acquaintances, effective communication requires that you respect others and take their ideas seriously — even when you think they're dead wrong.

Talk about public issues can bring out strong emotions, because many of our beliefs are a large part of how we identify ourselves. You can respect another's feelings without necessarily agreeing with the conclusions that person has come to.

There are no sure-fire rules, but applying some basic principles will make your conversations more productive, satisfying, and enjoyable. Though many of these ground rules seem commonsensical, we all know that in practice they are not so commonly applied!

- Listen carefully to others. Try to really understand what they are saying and respond to it, especially when their ideas differ from your own. Try to avoid building your own arguments in your head while others are talking.
- Think together about what you want to get out of your conversations.
- Respect the confidential nature of personal stories.
- Be open to changing your mind; this will help you really listen to others' views.
- When disagreement occurs, keep talking. Explore the disagreement. Search for the common concerns beneath the surface. Above all, be civil.
- Value one another's experiences, and think about how they have contributed to group members' thinking.
- Help to develop one another's ideas. Listen carefully and ask clarifying questions

Appendix C

Comparison of dialogue and debate

Dialogue is collaborative: two or more sides work together toward common understanding.

Debate is oppositional: two sides oppose each other and attempt to prove each other wrong.

In dialogue, finding common ground is the goal.

In debate, winning is the goal.

In dialogue, one listens to the other side(s) in order to understand, find meaning, and find agreement.

In debate, one listens to the other side in order to find flaws and to counter its arguments.

Dialogue enlarges and possibly changes a participant's point of view.

Debate affirms a participant's own point of view.

Dialogue reveals assumptions for reevaluation.

Debate defends assumptions as truth.

Dialogue causes introspection on one's own position.

Debate causes critique of the other's position.

Dialogue opens the possibility of reaching a better solution than any of the original solutions.

Debate defends one's own positions as the best solution and excludes other solutions.

Dialogue creates an open-minded attitude: an openness to being wrong and an openness to change.

Debate creates a closed-minded attitude, a determination to be right.

In dialogue, one submits one's best thinking, knowing that other peoples' reflections will help improve it rather than destroy it.

In debate, one submits one's best thinking and defends it against challenge to show that it is right.

Dialogue calls for temporarily suspending one's beliefs.

Debate calls for investing wholeheartedly in one's beliefs.

In dialogue, one searches for basic agreements.

In debate, one searches for glaring differences.

In dialogue, one searches for strengths in the other positions.

In debate, one searches for flaws and weaknesses in the other position.

Dialogue involves a real concern for the other person and seeks to not alienate or offend.

Debate involves a countering of the other position without focusing on feelings or relationship and often belittles or deprecates the other person.

Dialogue assumes that many people have pieces of the answer and that together they can put them into a workable solution.

Debate assumes that there is a right answer and that someone has it.

Dialogue remains open-ended.

Debate implies a conclusion.

Adapted from a paper prepared by Shelley Berman, which was based on discussions of the Dialogue Group of the Boston Chapter of Educators for Social Responsibility (ESR). Other members included Lucile Burt, Dick Mayo-Smith, Lally Stowell, and Gene Thompson. For more information on ESR's programs and resources using dialogue as a tool for dealing with controversial issues, call the national ESR office at (617) 492-1764.

Appendix D

Rights, responsibilities, and skills of dialogue

For true dialogue to occur it needs to take place within a protective environment of mutually accepted rights and responsibilities, rooted in two fundamental values: respect for the human person and trust in the process of dialogue. Dialogue works best when the participants are willing to develop certain skills that facilitate the process.

Rights

1. Each person has the right to define him/herself without being labeled by others.
2. Each person has the right to express his or her beliefs, ideas and feelings.
3. Each person has the right to ask questions that help him/her understand what someone else has said.
4. Each person has the right not to change or be coerced to change.
5. Each person has the right to expect that what is said will be held in confidence.

Responsibilities

1. Each person must be willing to seriously question his/her assumptions about "the other."
2. Each person must allow others the same right of self-expression that s/he expects for him/herself.
3. Each person should ask questions that respect the other's right of self-definition, even in times of conflict or disagreement.
4. Each person must accept the others as equal partners in the dialogue, and acknowledge the dignity of the traditions represented.
5. Each person must agree to hold what others say in confidence.

Skills

1. Each person should be able to evaluate and articulate his/her own attitudes, values and positions on issues within the context of his/her tradition.
2. Each person should learn how to temporarily set aside his/her own views and feelings in order to be more sensitive to what the other is saying.
3. Each person should learn how to respond to questions in ways that help others understand.
4. Each person should learn to deal with different points of view while maintaining his/her own integrity.
5. Each person should learn to deal with others from a position of mutual trust, based on an expectation that others come to the dialogue in a spirit of honesty and sincerity.

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