

WHAT ARE STUDY CIRCLES?

A Brief Description

Study Circles are groups of 6-12 people who self-organize and generally meet regularly over a defined period to explore an important social issue. Each meeting commonly lasts two hours and is facilitated by a group member whose role is to ensure a focused and productive dialogue. Groups may choose to have different members serve as facilitators for each session. Because Study Circles are small, democratic and comprised of non-experts they can be employed by different organizations (civic organizations, church groups, etc.) or ad hoc groups and can be adapted to many different uses.

Prior to each session members prepare by reading resource materials that provide a background for the issue being studied. Generally speaking, the materials have been compiled and organized by the sponsor of the particular study circle. They are chosen to encourage dialogue as members explore the issue. Some groups choose to create their own materials.

Study Circles provide valuable opportunities for members to develop and express their own ideas within a supportive context. Members experience a growing sense of empowerment as they accumulate new information and explore new ideas about complex issues. The experiences in Study Circles and the knowledge and understandings gained by members often lead them to become more involved in civic action.

A Brief History

The idea of Study Circles originated in the US in the late 19th century and peaked in the early 20th century when over 700,000 citizens participated in thousands of Study Circles throughout the country.

In time the Study Circle concept was adopted by Sweden as a way of promoting a strong and informed citizen base for their democracy. The Swedish government helps to fund, but not control, these Study Circles. At any given time during the year 30% of the adult population is engaged in over 300,000 Study Circles. Swedish towns promote Study Circles for their citizens to study pressing civic and economic issues.

Study Circles in Our Country

For information about Study Circles in this country visit the web site of Everyday Democracy: <http://www.everyday-democracy.org/en/Article.678.aspx> where you will be able to find many ideas and tools to help you create your own Study Circles, or where you can find up-to-date Study Circle Guides on many of the social, economic and political issues that we face today.

- Karen Scarvie, Adult Programs Committee, Cedars Unitarian Universalist Church