

Circles of Life
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Five years ago, following the Rodney King incident that sparked violence in Los Angeles, the mayor of Lima, Ohio, worried. An incident in his town of 50,000 made it clear to David Berger that race relations wasn't just a big-city problem. So he invited the local clergy to address the public along with him.

"When I brought them together, I found I had to introduce them to each other," said Berger. "It struck me as odd and symptomatic of the larger problems in the community. We found that race is a silent and ignored issue in our community."

From that first group of clergy, Berger garnered a consensus that this silence was something religious groups, as well as the government and community at large, needed to do something about together. So they began a search for programs that could guide them. And they found the Topsfield Foundation's Study Circle Resource Center, which since 1990 has promoted the use of small-group, democratic, highly participatory discussions known as study circles.

These were started in Lima five years ago as an exchange between two churches and have continued to expand and generate a wide variety of projects, from soup kitchens to church exchanges and youth mentoring.

Berger receives a steady stream of phone calls from people from other communities interested in the program. "We make no pretense that everything is wonderful," he said. He's also quick to add that the program requires "a lot of hard work and perspiration." But when it's done right — when people from different ethnic and religious backgrounds are deliberately matched up in study circles and proceed through the study materials — the results are positive.

"We continue to be surprised how this movement sustains itself — the energy and momentum that come out of the discussion help keep things moving," said Berger. "We have enough anecdotal evidence that where it's done well, these study circles matter to people and are making a difference." So far, about 2,000 people have been involved in study circles, and the city has trained between 200 and 250 facilitators to lead them.

While Lima has one of the longest-running programs, the city isn't alone. According to Matt Lighninger of the Study Circle Resource Center, 43 communities around the country, ranging in size from Orford, N.H. (pop. 1,000), to Los Angeles have active study circles. In addition to race relations, they're using materials on topics such as crime and violence, education, youth, immigration and criminal justice.

In October, Miami launched its first study circle program titled "Changing Faces, Changing Communities — Immigration and Race Relations, Education, Language Differences and Job Opportunities." (Study circles in Los Angeles also are studying this material.)

"It's a very young movement, but the growth shows that people realize government can't solve these problems alone," said Lighninger. "The free market can't solve these problems alone. Citizens need to get involved with government, with business, with the community to really make an impact."

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