

Southeast UU Ministers Create Circles of Trust

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UU Small Group Ministry Network, Fall 2005

As small group ministry takes hold in our liberal religious faith movement, our religious professionals are looking at ways to familiarize themselves with the notion and structures of these groups, to understand their power in shaping individual spirituality and community, and to model this practice. **The Spring program at the Southeast UU Ministers Association (SEUUMA) meeting was an introduction to and direct experience of Circles of Trust, developed by educator and social commentator Parker Palmer.** Palmer's latest book, "A Hidden Wholeness" and his earlier book, "The Courage To Teach," both describe these small groups.

For background, the approximately thirty ministers participating were asked to read about circles of trust in Palmer's own writings. I introduced his work briefly and described his central premise. **We live in a society where hiding our authentic selves, "our shy souls" as Palmer calls them, is the norm, and that opportunities for safe places and spaces for intimate truth telling are rare.**

My colleague, Rev. Dr. Glenda Gray, and I then outlined the **conditions for creating circles of trust**: that they need not be the singular matrix of our lives, in that we belong to other communities; that they can be embedded in a setting, like a UU congregation which has an ongoing institutional life; that they have a skilled leader or moderator whose role is to be first among equals in creating and protecting a space where everyone's soul can feel safe; and that there is an open invitation, but not a demand, for participation at any time.

Most striking in Palmer's circles is the use of silence. Sessions begin with silence and the invitation for individuals to share responses to the question of the day or the readings that have been prepared. Silence is used to bring the group back from distractions and interruptions, or to allow time to ensure that all who wish to speak have the chance. Graceful ambiance is important to Palmer and his small groups. We are asked to look around to see whether there is enough air, light, and touches of beauty.

The SEUUMA ministers divided into small groups or circles to respond to a single question, and following this we asked for the questions that were burning for them in their lives as religious leaders and seeking individuals:

- When did you feel safest as a child?
- When do you feel safe now?
- What restores you?
- What has been your greatest learning in this lifetime so far?
- Are you living your life in a way that honors your deepest commitment?
- Where does your strength come from?
- What is a source of authority for you?
- How would you define living a UU "undivided life"?
- What fills you with passion?

These and other questions may guide our next times in a circle of trust, either in our own congregations or when we meet in the fall for our semi-annual gathering.