

## **Small Group Ministry and Growth**

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The UU Church of Bloomington, Indiana (UUCB) has just launched its fourth year of Chalice Circles, our small group ministry. Our model is that of a congregation-wide ministry, well supported by the ministers and church leadership and funded by the congregation, and including service projects to the church and the community. We had spent an entire year planning this program and securing the buy-in of our Board of Directors and ministers before the initial startup, and we attribute the strong continuity of Chalice Circles to this firm foundation. We form new circles each year in September and they meet through May. We have had approximately 90 participants each year, including ten or eleven facilitators trained by our two ministers. We have sent several Chalice Circles coordinators to the UU Small Group Ministry Institutes at Ferry Beach and The Mountain for leadership training in this area.

There are many factors that can contribute to church growth. We are a vital congregation with many strong programs, a dedicated and stable staff, a very strong religious education program, a campus ministry, and co-ministers. While I don't know if we can correlate our congregation's growth (from membership of 378 in 2006 to 415 in 2009) specifically with the Chalice Circles ministry, one thing we know is that Chalice Circles began at a time when our growth had taken us from one Sunday service to two and many people were feeling more of a sense of anonymity in the congregation due to our larger size. With a crowded, lively fellowship hour between the services, some people are better able to relate and meet new people in a smaller setting. We needed a way to allow many people to experience the connectedness they needed to stay involved with the church. Many people have said that this was an invaluable opportunity for them to get to know others and themselves better.

Much positive feedback from the participants through our annual evaluations is evidence that Chalice Circles has helped them meet their expectations of feeling connected in this large church. We do know that this year and last year more Chalice Circles participants have been new church attendees than in its first two years. We know that several people have joined the church as a result of making Chalice Circles their entrée into the congregation, so at least for this group we can relate small group ministry to growth.

<http://www.uubloomington.org/invl/chaliceCircles/index.php>