

## **Program Notes**

### **Small Group Ministry and Assessment: Supportive Partners**

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Chalice Circles, the small group ministry program at the UU Church of Bloomington, Indiana, has operated for four years. During that time we have worked hard to support and improve the program. A critical component of this “maintenance” effort has been on-going assessments—both formal and informal. The purpose of these assessments is to generate valuable information that can be used to improve the program.

Most of the informal feedback we receive comes from Chalice Circle facilitators, who meet in two groups with our ministers, on a monthly basis. At a recent facilitator meeting, a first-year facilitator was having a problem that was considered by the group. This led to the question of how to better support first-time facilitators as they grow in their roles. Should we provide more training at the beginning of the year? Should we provide more training during the year? Should we pair our first-time facilitators with veteran mentors? These and other related questions will be considered before the next facilitator training begins in the fall.

In the first year of Chalice Circles we began using “exit interviews.” These were used to get formal feedback from individuals who decided to drop out of Chalice Circles during the year. Our goal was to find out, in a systematic way, why people decided to leave their groups and to use that information to improve the program. A member of the Chalice Circle Executive Committee would interview these individuals by phone or in person. We found that most were dropping out because they were looking for a different kind of fellowship in the church; they were not looking for deep listening, the core of our small group ministry. This finding led to a much more focused description of what Chalice Circles were about in the letter to congregants about the program, in the message given by the minister on Kick-Off Sunday, and in the covenants that each group developed at the beginning of the year. In our fourth year, almost no one dropped out. We attribute this, in part, to our response to feedback from drop-outs and to the formal evaluations which will be discussed next.

At the end of each year, we ask each Chalice Circle participant to complete a written evaluation of the program. The resulting data is then compiled and reviewed by the Executive Committee, again with the goal of improving the program. As mentioned above, the evaluation results have been used to better develop our message of deep listening. Another general theme that came out of these end-of-year evaluations has to do with session plans—people who had participated in Chalice Circles for more than one year wanted to see some new session plans. This concern has led to a concerted effort to continually identify new session plans for Chalice Circles to use.

Small group ministry is a critical component of healthy congregations. Systematic assessment is needed to keep the program growing and vital. I invite others to share how they use assessment to improve their small group ministry programs.

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