

Emerson Listening Circles

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In 2008, the UU Congregation of Marietta joined with the Emerson UU Congregation to form a larger, stronger congregation. At that time, Marietta had two active chalice groups. One group contained our own members; the second group was a mixture of congregations. While Emerson had not begun a formal chalice group program, these two Marietta groups continued to meet “under the radar” after we joined the Emerson congregation.

Early in 2011, a steering committee formed, made up of leaders of the Marietta SGM programs and a longtime member of Emerson who had received facilitator training a number of years earlier. We shared with our new minister, Rev. Jeff Jones, our experience with our program and the vision we had for groups at Emerson. Rev. Jeff immediately put the formation of a SGM program on his agenda for the year and the board approved his priorities. We were on our way.

We chose the name “*Emerson Listening Circles*” because it signified our intent to listen deeply to others and to also listen deeply within. Our focus was on listening instead of talking. We felt deep listening was a crucial skill for spiritual development.

Rev. Jeff chose eight facilitators. Two of these folks would receive training, but would be standing-by-for growth. We felt confident we could create five or six groups of six to ten members. All the facilitators agreed to attend a Listening Circle, lead by Rev. Jeff, once a month. This group was an opportunity for our own spiritual development and also an opportunity to continue our training by sharing joys, sorrows, and solutions about issues arising in our groups.

We developed a plan, created a brochure, and wrote articles for the congregation’s weekly email to members and for the monthly newsletter. We planned logistics for a facilitator’s training run by Rev. Jeff.

Rev. Jeff’s sermon about ‘deep listening,’ was a great introduction for his next sermon about a “wonderful” new program called “Emerson Listening Circles.” A delightful story was performed about the little church on the hill that kept growing and growing, had members who did not know each other, and so on. It made the congregation laugh and pay attention. During his sermon, Rev. Jeff eloquently expressed the value of the Emerson Listening Circle program for members, new UU’s and visitors. At the end of the sermon, he invited the congregation to experience a “Listening Circle” demonstration during the second hour (RE programs for adults). The order of service contained a list of facilitators, their meeting location, and the room for the demo after the service with signup sheets. All of the newly trained facilitators led a one hour session, entitled “Listening.”

We were surprised and delighted to have 72 people sign up. This meant we would not have the five or six circles we hoped for, but NINE CIRCLES! All of our “stand-by” facilitators, with no time to rest, jumped in and began their own groups. One facilitator lead two circles until another recruit attended the October SGM Training at the UU Church of Chattanooga, TN, presented by the UU Small Group Ministry Network.

We have lost a few group members and gained some. We currently have 76 people in our groups, a phenomenal number for a congregation of about 120 people. We believe the circles will be especially

beneficial to those new to UU-ism and will strengthen their introduction and involvement while providing an instant collection of sharing friends. We are going to hold the number of groups at nine this year and plan another facilitator training next August.

One of our circles provides child care, removing one of the obstacles for parents to attend. We have also surveyed our groups to discover which meeting places are handicapped accessible. Next year, we plan to begin a group that meets during the day in the hopes it will attract some of our senior members who may not want to attend evening meetings. We are interested in hearing about churches that have youth and young adult SGM programs as well.

Our facilitator meetings are very important to the success of the program. They provide deepening friendships, generate new ideas and instill confidence in all of us. But most importantly, they are an opportunity to practice “Deep Listening” for others in the group and within ourselves, so we can carry “Deep Listening” into all of our groups. We believe these elements in the formation of our SGM program will encourage a program with a “Going Deeper” culture.

We believe our planning, training, the worship services that introduced the program, the marketing, and demonstrations have all had an impact on the level of listening occurring. Our minister-led monthly facilitator circle is also instrumental in maintaining the quality of our listening services. Our program is young. The initial turn-out tells us many are craving the kind of sharing available through a small group ministry program. We know more challenges will develop as the groups mature. We are optimistic that the structure and support we have in place will continue to foster healthy groups. We are also grateful for the help, education and guidance we continue to receive from the Small Group Ministry Network.

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