

Soulful Circles – what are they anyway?

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough
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Opening Words

From the fragmented world of our everyday lives
We gather together in search of wholeness.
By many cares and preoccupations
By diverse and selfish aims
Are we separated from one another
And divided within ourselves.
Yet we know that no branch is utterly severed
From the Tree of Life that sustains us all.
- Commission on Common worship

Sermon

There are many kinds of small groups that can be formed within a faith community such as ours, each falling under the category of small group ministry. Our committees may be considered small groups that do ministry; Celebrate the Circle is a small group; the Re-entry support groups; the WOW women's group. Each of these groups adds its own richness and depth to the life of the congregation. Each fills a particular need for relationship building and supporting our community. This morning I want to focus on a different type of small group ministry that we'll be starting in this congregation this fall, which we're calling "Soulful Circles". Often called Covenant Groups or Covenant Circles in other Unitarian Universalist congregations, these circles will be designed to give long-time members, newer members, friends, and brand new visitors a place to get to know one another on a deeper level. Unlike other small ministry groups that may focus on the participants' hobbies, interests, age or gender, Soulful Circles will cut across categories to invite people from all walks of life to learn and grow together.

I'd like to share with you a little of my own experience with covenant groups and then explain why I am so passionate about starting some of these here at UUCH.

Several years ago the Eno River UU Fellowship in Durham, where I was then a member, noticed that because of rapid growth, people were starting to lose track of one another. Their solution to this problem was to develop a network of smaller cells of people to meet in one another's homes for fellowship and spiritual nurturing. The goal was to have a majority of current members being part of groups as well as having places readily available for new members to meet current members. We called this network of cells covenant groups, and we decided to use that term for two reasons. First, it was a way of honoring our history as congregations that covenant with one another to live together in agreed upon ways rather than subscribing to a doctrine or creed. Second, each of the groups, from the beginning, was asked to write their own covenant, describing what it was about, how it was going to operate, and what was expected of each member. Now, I know this sounds like a lot of formality for UUs, but let me explain why this was so important. In these groups we tended to get into some delicate discussions, and having a container for these discussions provided a level of safety that was understood by all participants. The covenant was a way of creating that container, that common understanding. There is a paradox to human interactions that might seem counterintuitive. And that is that structure within a group actually makes it safer for people to be informal and open with one another. In fact, I'm a big fan of creating covenants for any group that meets within a congregation. That way when a debate becomes heated or toes are being stepped on, any member of the group can feel free to say, "I'd like for us to remember the covenant we made with each other."

Back to our covenant group: our agreement first described how the meetings would be shaped. We would gather for 15 minutes of social time, then move to another space. We would open with a reading and chalice lighting, then have a check-in. The person leading the session would then say a few words about the topic to be discussed for the evening, and then we would have a few minutes of silence followed by chimes. Members would then be invited to respond to the topic for up to 5 minutes of uninterrupted time. When everyone had had a

chance to respond, we would open it up for discussion. This sharing would take place over an hour or so. Then we had a “check-out’, going around the room asking everyone what they particularly liked about the session, and how they were feeling. We would then extinguish the chalice with some closing words.

The groups were designed to have 4 to 10 members, and to always have an empty chair for a new member. Studies have shown that this size group is ideal for the kind of sharing we had, and is most welcoming to new members. When the members grew to 12, the group split to two smaller groups. While this proved to be hard for our group whenever it became necessary, we were clear that the kind of radical hospitality it signals to new people was worth the price.

This is just one form of small group ministry, but one that fits particularly well with my own theology of what a congregation should be about. Congregations are not just places to meet friendly people; they are places that should offer opportunities to create deep friendships. They are places to learn what it means to be human, and to create opportunities for more soulful living. I have seen these kinds of small groups transform people’s lives. Why is that so? How does that happen?

Consider that in human interactions, there are four primary ways of communicating with others: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Of these four skills, very few of us have any training in listening. In *empathic* listening. Empathic listening focuses on understanding the other person. Most of us do not do this – we listen with the intent to reply. When we are in conversation, we are generally either speaking or preparing to speak. We are filtering what we hear through our own experience, reading their story into our own lives. “Oh, I know just how you feel!” we say.

Do you?

Or, “I went through the very same thing!”

Did you?

Empathic listening is listening to understand another person's paradigm, to understand their frame of reference. To try to see the world the way *they* see the world. It does not mean you agree with their world view. It's that you fully, deeply, understand that person, emotionally as well as intellectually.

In his book, *Seven Habits for Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey writes that next to physical survival, the greatest human need is psychological survival – to be understood, to be affirmed, to be validated, to be appreciated (p. 241). He calls listening with empathy giving another person psychological air.

To listen with this kind of intent is to touch another's soul. This is why I have named these small groups Soulful Circles. Each group will use a format that encourages this kind of deep, empathic listening. Each group will have a facilitator who will help the group maintain this focus on listening. If you have 8 people in your group, they will make sure that 7/8ths of your time is spent listening.

We should do this for one another. Beginning today after the service, I will have registration forms available, and the groups will begin meeting in September and will continue through June. I urge you to consider joining a one of the Soulful Circles. These kinds of groups are compassion in practice; tolerance guided by principle.

It is an opportunity to bless others with our presence in their lives. May it be so, and blessed be.