Chapter III

Background and Introduction to the Study

This chapter introduces the key elements of the report, including the origins and nature of the study and an introduction to the programs in the 17 learning sites chosen for the study.

This chapter introduces the key elements of this report: the origins and nature of the study; the background of the community-wide approach to study circles; the "best practices" nature of the study; the premises and key presumptions that shaped the study; an introduction to key terms; the major research questions; and an introduction to the programs in the 17 learning sites chosen for the study.

A. Origins of the study

In July, 1998 the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation offered a grant to the Topsfield Foundation, Inc. (TFI), sponsor of the Study Circles Resource Center (SCRC), to conduct a study intended to deepen understanding of what study circle programs uniquely contribute to community problem solving, particularly with regard to improving race relations, and to identify and highlight the constellation of effective practices organizers have developed to produce successful community-wide study circle programs. The study took place from September 1, 1998 through September 1, 2000. The Mott Foundation provided $363,650 through the Race Relations section of its Civil Society Program.

TFI engaged Roberts & Kay, Inc. (RKI) to conduct the study. RKI formed a four-person Best Practices team that included two women and two men, two of whom are people of color and two of whom are European American/white; each team member brings particular expertise in content or processes central to the study. See Appendix A for more information about Best Practices team members.

This comprehensive report is one product of the two-year study. The study yielded several additional products:

- A short report for study circle practitioners — people who produce community-wide study circle programs; this practitioner report is intended to be useful also to people who are considering launching a community-wide program

- Content for a short brochure intended for use with potential supporters (funders and coalition members)

- Case studies from three of the learning sites for use as determined by SCRC/TFI
- A detailed memorandum for SCRC/TFI use containing findings gleaned from the study that lie outside the formal research questions and questions the study raised
- Site visit summaries from the initial visit to each of the learning sites, prepared for the people from each community who participated in the study

The decision makers at the Mott Foundation and TFI believed that the practice of producing community-wide study circle programs, though still in its early development, had reached a stage suitable for deep investigation of the essentials. TFI believed that many aspects of study circle organizing and implementation could be improved by understanding more deeply the core processes involved in community-wide programs and by identifying ways to make those processes as effective as possible.

B. Background of the community-wide approach to study circles

TFI founded SCRC in 1989 and dedicated it to advancing deliberative democracy and improving the quality of public life in the United States. SCRC promotes the use of study circles — small-group, democratic, highly participatory public conversations that give everyday people opportunities to make a difference on critical social and political issues.

Early in its history, SCRC began working to support people interested in talking together about community issues and opportunities in a deliberative way, learning about each other's views, and figuring out together how to bring about community improvements. SCRC had a vision that all kinds of people — not just the usual public figures and leaders — could use small group deliberation to improve their communities. SCRC began developing written guides for public conversations on specific topics among small groups of interested citizens, and began suggesting to communities ways to use these guides most effectively to produce carefully planned and facilitated groups that welcomed and included all who were interested.

Each written guide included questions and perspectives constructed somewhat like the deliberative conversation tools then being produced by the Kettering Foundation. The guides built on the Kettering focus on citizens' authority and responsibility for considering public issues and making choices about approaches after considering the trade-offs involved in different policy options. Through experience, SCRC learned that people were interested in talking about community issues for more than one session, and that it made a big difference if the initial session invited those present to introduce themselves and their connections to the issue. This opening, which became a standard feature in all SCRC guides, both developed relationships among participants and generated information they could use in future shared problem solving.

Responding to the Rodney King verdict in 1991, communities increasingly sought SCRC assistance with community conversations on race and racism. In order to meet this need, SCRC developed a conversation guide called Can't We All Just Get Along? (This guide has since been modified and is now called Facing the Challenge of Racism and Race Relations.)

Besides addressing an issue that many communities wanted to consider, this SCRC guide for the first time explicitly called for people to bring together the whole community, though it lacked specific suggestions about how organizers might make that happen. In 1991 the early guide came to the attention of interested people in Lima, Ohio, who faced civil unrest in their own city and decided to address it by finding a way for African Americans/blacks and European Americans/whites to be together and learn to talk with each other about race. In essence, the mayor of Lima, David Berger, and the Clergy Task Force he formed were seeking a way to invite a whole community to work together to address racial issues.

SCRC staff people worked with organizers in Lima to produce the first community-wide round of study circles. Lima organizers worked hard to forge new relationships between historically segregated and isolated religious communities. After a successful pilot round that included 75 members of two churches — St. Paul AME, a predominantly African American/black congregation, and Zion Lutheran, a predominantly European American/white congregation — organizers expanded the study circle effort to include multi-racial circles drawn from the congregations of 34 churches and 1 synagogue. More than 800 people participated in this first community-wide round of study circles in Lima.

From this beginning, SCRC and organizers in an increasing number of communities began to refine and shape an approach to conducting study circles as connected sets or rounds of a significant number of circles all occurring within the same five- or six-week period, rather than as isolated small groups, and all focusing on the same topic. Communities discovered the strength that came from forming coalitions or collaborative, diverse groups of organizations that planned and produced the study circles together, rather than leaving all the work to a single organization. This became the essence of the community-wide model, through which many people and organizations worked together as a community on an issue.

Based on experiences in a number of communities, SCRC staff and community organizers came to believe that this community-wide approach offered the greatest visibility and potential for study circles to effect positive change on a variety of public issues. The approach helped attract people from all parts of the community and from all kinds of backgrounds, and helped

expand the circle of community involvement. The large scale and ambitious scope of community-wide rounds of study circles also helped attract attention and recruit participants.

By 1996, SCRC had gathered enough experience and worked with enough communities taking the "rounds approach" to formulate a written guide for producing study circles within the framework of the community-wide model. In April, 2000, 188 communities in the United States were actively working on some aspect of producing a community-wide study circle program. This Best Practices study focuses on the community-wide model and seeks to understand more about the ways effective programs have used the model or adapted it to their particular contexts.

C. The "best practices" nature of the study

Best practices studies are increasingly common learning tools for complex change efforts. TFI identified this study as a "best practices" study in its original program description for the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation.

The Best Practices team views best practices studies as having the following characteristics:

- The roots of best practices work can be found in the quality improvement domain of industrial processes. The theory behind that effort is that the people closest to a process are the ones most likely to be able to discover ways to improve it. If they are empowered to make those improvements, and if sufficiently motivated to do so, the people who produce work can improve it steadily by learning from their own efforts and from others who do similar work but may accomplish it differently, with better results.

- In a best practices study, the standard setters are the peer group of people and organizations working on a similar process or product.

- While some have questioned the use of the term "best" and have suggested other terms, such as "exemplary" or "promising," we use the more familiar term here and mean it to suggest that the practices people identify in this study are the best ***as far as we can tell with what we can know at this time*** — they are not "best" in an absolute and final sense.

- Within a context of great complexity and commitment to continuous improvement, practices that are "best" at any one point will yield gradually to continuing evolution of understanding and experience. This Best Practices study aims simply to identify those practices that seem best for a particular growth stage in the life of study circles in a given community context.

D. Premises guiding this Best Practices study

Working with TFI, the Best Practices team developed the following premises to guide its work:

1. A focus on usefulness

Both the research sponsors and the researchers themselves intend for the study to develop new information and understanding that will be useful to study circle practitioners; an additional purpose is to advance the field of knowledge about dialogue and community problem solving, particularly with regard to issues of racism and race relations.

This intention is in line with the approach toward assessing the effectiveness of complex community change initiatives advocated by Lisbeth Schorr, author of Common Purpose, and other leading thinkers. Schorr and Public Agenda president Daniel Yankelovich wrote recently:

> Insistence on irrefutable scientific proof of causal connections [when studying community initiatives] has become an obstacle to finding out what works, frustrating the nation's hunger for evidence that social programs are on the right path. Ironically, the methods considered most "scientific" can actually defeat thoughtful assessments of promising interventions . . . because scientific experiments are best equipped to study isolated interventions, while the most promising social programs don't consist of discrete, circumscribed pieces. (Schorr and Yankelovich, 2000)

Other sources that informed the research team's thinking about this premise include Brookings Institution, 1998; Connell et al., 1995; NIDR FORUM, 1997; Patton, 1986.

(See Appendix F for a full citation of these and other sources cited in this chapter.)

2. A concentration on community-wide programs

The "learning unit" for the study is the community-wide study circle program. As described earlier, community-wide programs are those in which a broad-based coalition works to engage

significant numbers of citizens in structured, facilitated, face-to-face study circles on a specific topic within a defined time period. In addition, community-wide study circles typically feature a public kick-off event that draws attention to the effort and generates energy for it, and an action forum at the close of the study circle sessions that offers opportunities for those participants who want to take further action on the issue the study circles have addressed. Increasingly, community-wide programs are inventing additional links to action that function beyond the action forum. Ranging from support of ongoing action groups to the engagement of full-time staff to support action, these program components are not specifically part of the community-wide model fostered by SCRC during the time of the Best Practices study, according to the 1996 SCRC publication Planning Community-Wide Study Circle Programs: A Step-by-Step Guide. These additional program components, however, are strong features of some community-wide programs.

3. A "key informant" role for organizers

Because of the focus on getting to know more about community-wide programs, the study relies heavily on the views of those who produce study circles — organizers, decision makers, and, to some extent, facilitators — for information and insights about the effectiveness of particular practices and strategies. Although the reliance on organizers is strong, it is not exclusive. The study includes the views of a significant number of study circle participants as well; their insights about what does and doesn't work in implementing a community-wide study circle program added depth to the team's understanding about how the model works in practice.

Sources that informed the research team's thinking about this premise include Beebe, 1995; Beebe, 1987; Chambers, 1994; Chambers, 1987; Murray, 1999.

4. A commitment to joint learning about what works rather than an arms-length evaluation

The study is intended as a way for study circle practitioners, SCRC staff, TFI, and the Best Practices team to accomplish joint learning about what works. The study is not an arms-length evaluation, and is not built on the model of scientific

experimentation. In designing the study, the Best Practices team and TFI judged evaluation to be inappropriate given the youth of study circle programs. Team members also determined that an experimental model of evaluation was essentially impossible given the enormous diversity and complexity of study circle efforts in the United States. As a result, the team has emphasized its members' intention to act as learning partners with communities.

Sources that informed the research team's thinking about this premise include Whyte, 1991.

5. A framework of democratic dialogue and deliberation

Small group conversations were the heart of every study circle program in the 17 learning sites. The study is premised on the expectation that organizers in every site valued these conversations as a tool for working on community issues in a democratic way. Although organizers in the learning sites did not use these terms explicitly, the Best Practices team presumes that the study circle programs in every learning site were built on a framework of democratic dialogue and deliberation.

Sources that informed the research team's thinking about this premise include Barber, 1998a; Barber, 1998b; Gastil, 1993, Gutman and Thompson, 1996; Mathews, 1994; Young, 1997.

6. A particular concentration on race and racism

While study circles have addressed a number of pressing community issues, more rounds of study circles have been devoted to some aspect of race or racial equity than any other topic. Because of this, and because of the funder's particular interest in the effectiveness of study circles as a means of addressing these topics, the Best Practices study concentrates particularly on those programs that focused on race and racism.

Sources that informed the research team's thinking about this premise include Dalton, 1995; Dubois and Hutson, 1997; Guinier, 1994; Guinier, 1998; Nagda et al., 1995; National Conference for Community and Justice, 1998; Schoene and DuPraw, 1994; Zúñiga and Nagda, 1993.

7. A reliance on qualitative methods

The study takes a qualitative approach in order to offer opportunities for the team to engage at length with the key learning communities and address their complexity and richness across time and in some detail. Qualitative approaches offer researchers the opportunity to listen and observe in order to learn how participants in particular situations described their experiences in their own words. Qualitative methods offer the most appropriate first-stage research for complex community initiatives that are new, amorphous, and widely varying in many key features — all of which are characteristics of community-wide study circle programs at the time of the Best Practices initiative.

Finally, qualitative methods were necessary and appropriate because of the dearth of quantitative data as a starting point. Because many study circle programs operated initially as volunteer-driven campaigns, few programs had the resources to keep reliable track of basic aspects of their study circle programs (number of participants, racial and ethnic background of participants, racial and ethnic background of facilitators, etc.). It appears that this situation may begin to change as programs develop experience and move toward some degree of permanency; few programs in the Best Practices learning sites were institutionalized in these key ways during the time of the study.

The qualitative approaches in this study are appropriate for the life stage of the study circle programs included in the study. Quantitative studies should become more possible and more appropriate as study circle programs become more mature.

Sources that informed the research team's thinking about this premise include Mason, 1996.

For a more detailed look at the methodology in this study, see Appendix B.

E. Presumptions and questions about study circles that underlie this study

This Best Practices study is built on three presumptions and one major area of inquiry.

1. Study circles are valuable.

A primary presumption of this Best Practices study is that study circles are a valuable way for people in communities to work directly on pressing public issues. Assessing the comparative value of the study circle method is not a function of this study; instead, describing the ways study circles offer value to communities is a key focus. For the purpose of this study, the researchers assume the fundamental positive value of study circles.

2. Individual dialogue sessions are similar in different communities.

Although the Best Practices team understood that the ways communities construct their study circle programs vary widely, team members presumed that the individual study circles — the dialogue sessions — in the 17 learning sites followed quite closely a pattern or set of characteristics SCRC has defined since it began fostering study circles in the United States in 1989. Study circles, as described in SCRC publications, must have these characteristics:

- They take place face-to-face in small groups that are as diverse as possible.
- They take place across several sessions, typically three to five.
- They are voluntary and highly participatory.
- Facilitators who take no position on the issues guide each session.
- During the conversations, participants and facilitators use a written framework or guide that has a specific issue focus.

- The issues considered are public; if they are complex, they are broken into manageable pieces for discussion; if the issue is controversial, the intention is for study circles to deal with it in depth, with all viewpoints taken seriously.

- The first session invites study circle participants to describe their personal connection to the issue; later sessions broaden the conversation to include a more public- or policy-oriented consideration of the issue; in the final session, and sometimes earlier, organizers invite and encourage participants to consider taking action on the issue.

Individual study circles built along these lines form the basic units of a community-wide study circle program.

3. Implementation of the community-wide model varies according to community contexts and decisions.

This study focused on programs in 17 places that linked a significant number of individual study circles together in a community-wide study circle program. Programs that adopt the community-wide model are strongly positioned to "link democratic theory and democratic practices," as described in the brochure for the Topsfield Foundation, Inc. Community experiences, particularly those in Lima, Ohio, beginning in 1993, have influenced the development of the SCRC model for community-wide study circle programs. While it is likely that the model is still evolving, at the time of the Best Practices study in 1999 and 2000 the model included these essential components:

- A coalition of people, organizations, and institutions with different perspectives on the issue and with a dedication to collaboration

- Commitment to "a common purpose: the involvement of ordinary citizens from all parts of the community and open discussions on the critical issue" [Source: Planning Community-Wide Study Circle Programs: A Step-by-Step Guide, pages 1-3]

- Efforts to engage a sizable number of citizens in a sizable number of study circles in order to boost attention for the effort and increase the chances that the results will influence large-scale change
- Concentration on attracting diversity in the coalition, at all levels of organizing, and among both facilitators and participants
- A planned, thoughtful approach to recruiting, training, and supporting a diverse group of facilitators
- Careful site management to increase incentives for participation
- Effective work to engage community media as partners in the effort
- Production of large-scale public forums as components of an overall program; typically these include at least a kick-off event at the beginning of the study circles themselves and an action forum after the study circles have been completed
- A concentration on action or community change as an intended outgrowth of study circles, and specific strategies linking dialogue with action

Though the researchers began the study with the presumption of variation in implementation of the community-wide model, the significance and extent of that variation only became clear as the study unfolded. Though not originally intended, the Best Practices team found it necessary to devote attention to these variations in implementation of the community-wide model. The examples throughout the study reflect the team's understanding of variation among the differently structured community-wide programs.

4. Whether study circles are effective in addressing racism is an inquiry central to the study.

In addition to its focus on the community-wide model, this study concentrates particularly — but not exclusively — on discovering ways effective programs use study circles to address race,

racism, race relations, and other race-related topics. In addition to developing findings about best practices with regard to addressing race, the last two major sections of the study move into exploratory territory. These two sections take an initial look at the questions of whether study circles are an effective tool for addressing racism, and how the study circle topic impacts on both participation in the circles and their effectiveness in addressing racism. Of the 17 learning sites, 10 (58.8 percent) addressed topics related to race. One addressed diversity. [Note: This is a reasonably close reflection of the overall picture when the Best Practices study began in 1998. At that point, of 39 community-wide programs, 23 (58.9 percent) addressed race. For comparison, in mid-2000, at the close of the study, SCRC reports 190 community-wide programs, of which 78 (41 percent) address race.]

F. Introduction to key terms

Here are some important terms, with definitions or explanations of the way the term is intended and applied in this report:

Coalition:

All members of the working group plus all partners.

Communities:

Primarily, the geographic locations where study circles took place in the 17 learning sites. Most communities are towns or cities, although Alread (population around 400) has no town center. (Also note that two learning sites were states that included multiple communities where study circles took place.)

The report occasionally uses "communities" in a non-geographic sense when it refers to "communities of affiliation," meaning the societal group with which a person shares cultural or historical bonds.

Community-wide program model:

An approach to organizing and producing study circles for maximum impact in the community. The model evolved across time based on experience in communities; it is a product of joint learning by active study circle communities in collaboration with SCRC. Typical elements of the community-wide model include building an intentionally diverse coalition, recruiting broadly for both participants and facilitators who reflect the community's diversity, holding a highly visible kick-off event and action forum, and taking other steps to ensure that study circle dialogue work results in positive community change.

Coordinator:

The one or two people who play the central coordinating role in each learning site. The coordinators may be paid, unpaid, or paid for part of their work but not all. Typically, the coordinators are the persons in each community who are in closest contact with SCRC. In addition, the coordinator(s) typically organized or helped organize the Best Practices team visit. Coordinators are considered organizers as well.

Dialogue:

For this study, dialogue refers to the activities that take place among small groups of study circle participants during the face-to-face facilitated sessions, usually four to six in number, as they consider a particular community public issue. The Best Practices researchers know that "dialogue" has many different meanings, and is a term claimed within several different research, deliberative, or even philosophical frameworks. In the present report, it is important to note that "dialogue" refers to the type of conversation that takes place during the first portion of the study circle experience for participants, the face-to-face conversations. In this context, dialogue does not preclude action, nor does it stand as the antithesis of action. Dialogue, as used in this report, might also be called public talk, civic talk, deliberation, or public conversation.

Initiator:

The person or persons who first have the idea of bringing study circles to a given place and who then take action that eventually results in formation of a study circle program or project. Initiators may or may not play further roles in the coalition.

Learning site:

The 15 communities and 2 states SCRC staff identified as having accomplished one or more aspects of the community-wide model in a noteworthy way; the primary learning source for the Best Practices study.

Organizers:

The people, both paid and unpaid, who manage (and often also carry out) the work of implementing rounds of study circles and who play key roles in managing and producing specific components of a round of study circles, including, in some learning sites, supporting or guiding follow-up action efforts.

Partners:

(May also be called sponsors, allies, or collaborators) Organizational or individual members of a study circle coalition who agree to carry out specific implementation tasks but do not participate extensively in key decision making; typical roles for partners include recruiting

participants; recruiting or training facilitators; identifying or providing space for sessions; assisting with promotion, particularly media promotion; or assisting with fund-raising.

Round:

The set or batch of study circles that happen within the same time frame, on the same topic, in a particular community. For example, a community might sponsor a round of 20 study circles on race in the first five weeks of the year. Each of the 20 groups might meet at a different time and place; each would use the same written guide for their conversation and hold the same number of sessions. In many cases, rounds end with an action forum or other gathering of all the participants in a central place for celebration, planning, and decision making about future work.

Study circle:

A small, diverse group of citizens who meet several times in facilitated sessions to address an issue of importance in their community. A study circle typically follows a written guide that leads participants through initial work to get to know each other and understand each other's background and experience with the issue, then invites consideration of public policy options and choices about the issue, and finally engages participants in considering how they can work for positive change on the issue.

Working group:

The core group of decision makers in a community; they decide how to structure study circles in a particular community and make decisions in such important areas as goals, topic, leadership, the structure and nature of the coalition, funding strategies, promotional tactics, and participant recruitment.

G. The main research questions underpinning this study

The research questions are based on the program description TFI and the Mott Foundation developed to launch the study. No community-wide study circle program had existed for longer than seven years at the time the study began. Most community-wide programs, including those identified as Best Practices learning sites, were much younger. Working with SCRC and TFI, the Best Practices team developed seven research questions that seemed appropriate to the growth stage of community-wide study circle programs and to the important emphasis on study circles as a tool for addressing race. These questions, which evolved as the study unfolded, organized all the inquiry, reading, and observation the team conducted.

The mission of the study was to develop workable, useful, practical answers to these seven research questions. The members of the Best Practices team rarely, if ever, asked these *research questions* directly to people or groups participating in the study, though we did show one or more of the research questions to some groups to help focus a particular conversation. Instead, the team developed a series of ***interview questions*** that made it easier for participants to talk about the topics the research questions covered. Answers to the interview questions, when analyzed, contributed to answering the research questions. See Appendix D for more information about the research and interview questions.

Here are the seven research questions:

1. What are the most effective practices for creating a broad-based, diverse organizing coalition? Specifically, what are the most effective practices for creating a coalition that is racially and ethnically diverse?

2. What are the most promising practices for recruiting a diverse group of facilitators? What are the most effective practices for training and supporting facilitators so that they can do their work effectively?

3. What are the most promising practices for recruiting participants from all parts of the community? What strategies are most promising for recruiting for racial and

ethnic diversity? What program elements besides recruitment strategies (such as the issue being considered, the up-front connection to change and action) are most important in recruiting for racial diversity?

4. What changes, outcomes, and results do organizers, facilitators, and participants ascribe to the study circle efforts in their communities? If on racism and race relations, what is the range of outcomes? If on another issue, how do the outcomes take into account the racial divisions and dynamics of the community?

5. What strategies, methods, or tactics do study circle organizers use to link study circles with community change efforts, and which are most effective? Specifically, how are programs linking to individual, collective, and institutional change initiatives on the issues of racism and race relations?

6. To what extent do organizers and participants consider study circles an effective tool for addressing racism?

7. What impact does topic have on (a) study circle programs' effectiveness in addressing racism, and (b) participation by people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds?

H. Introduction to the 17 learning sites

The Best Practices team worked with members of the Community Assistance team at SCRC to identify arenas of excellence in community-wide study circles. The result is a list of criteria, presented below. The criteria are not ranked in priority order.

The Community Assistance team recommended an array of programs that, taken together, could offer the Best Practices team excellent opportunities to see particular aspects of best study circle practices in action, and to learn from those programs that had developed the practices. The Community Assistance team believed that each individual learning site had demonstrated excellence in one or more of the program areas reflected in these criteria. Here are the criteria:

1. Coalition building

The core group of people committed to producing the entire study circle effort broadly reflected the community's diversity, and involved people who represent many kinds of leadership:

- Those who will increase the effort's visibility and make it attractive to potential participants
- Those who can assemble and allocate resources to the effort
- Those who can bring organizing skills to the many logistical challenges of study circles
- Those who will attract typically hard-to-reach groups, such as young people, senior citizens, low-income people, and people of color

2. Involvement of community leaders

Visible community leaders appeared among the key organizers, the coalition, the facilitator group (where appropriate), or the participant group. "Leaders" in this case includes elected officials, but is not limited to them.

3. Recruiting

The study circle effort showed particular creativity and success in the recruiting phase of organizing study circles.

4. Attention to diversity in recruiting

The study circle organizers used effective strategies to ensure significant diversity in study circles themselves.

5. Action council or task force

At the end of the study circle sessions, organizers in the community did an effective job of establishing task forces or work groups committed to specific future action.

6. Policy impact

The study circle effort has resulted in changes in public policy either through local or state legislation or regulatory change.

7. Ties to governance

The study circle effort involved citizens directly in improving their governance, or built stronger, more participatory governance structures.

8. Ties to action

The study circle effort led to valued, significant action in communities or states.

9. Other outcomes

The study circle effort produced significant or worthy results not accounted for in other categories.

10. Permanent institutional home

The study circle effort has begun developing a permanent organizational base and a way to sustain it.

Using these criteria, the SCRC Community Assistance team recommended 17 localities (communities and states) as good learning sites for the Best Practices study, and the Best Practices team accepted the recommendations. Here are those 17 learning sites:

ALREAD, ARKANSAS
Calling the Roll: Study Circles for Better Schools

Alread's study circle program began in 1998 in response to the statewide *Calling the Roll* project, which promoted the use of local study circles to address education issues. Nearly 100 people — one-quarter of Alread's population — participated in the first round of study circles on education. In 1999, Alread organizers developed their own guide on character education for a second round of study circles.

AURORA, ILLINOIS
Aurora Community Study Circles

In 1995, organizers at the Aurora YWCA initiated a study circle effort to address the YWCA mission of eliminating racism. In 1997, Aurora Community Study Circles separated from the YWCA and became an independent 501(c)(3) organization with two part-time staff members. To date, more than 2,000 people have participated in Aurora's quarterly study circles on race. The program is now expanding its work with young people through an effort entitled *Many Young Voices*.

COLORADO SPRINGS, COLORADO
Community Conversations on Race

Local community activists organized the Community Conversations on Race as a one-year study circle project to address racial intolerance in Colorado Springs. Colorado Springs' two rounds of study circles took place from 1998 to 1999, and attracted a total of 675 participants, nearly 50 percent of whom were people of color. While CCR disbanded after one year, two other local community organizations continue to provide people with opportunities for dialogue and follow-up work on the issues raised during the study circles.

DECATUR, GEORGIA
Decatur Roundtables

The study circle program in Decatur began in 1998 as a way to address mounting concerns around neighborhood issues and school district matters. Working with SCRC, Decatur organizers developed a discussion guide on the topic of neighborhoods, growth, and development, and engaged 450 people in one round of "Roundtables." While no future study circles are planned, the action teams and follow-up work that grew out of the Roundtables are alive and ongoing, as part of the city's strategic planning process.

FAYETTEVILLE, NORTH CAROLINA

In 1998, government, business, and organizational leaders in Fayetteville began organizing a study circle effort to improve the city's ability to deal constructively with racial problems and to improve the quality of life for all residents through dialogue. Over 300 people participated in one round of study circles on race. As one demonstration of their commitment to follow up on participants' specific recommendations, organizers have now conducted study circles on race with young people.

FT. MYERS, FLORIDA
Lee County Pulling Together

Study circles in Ft. Myers came about in 1997 in response to a national study that identified Ft. Myers as the most residentially segregated city in the South. Concerned citizens and community leaders created an independent, 501(c)(3) organization — Lee County Pulling Together (LCPT) — to organize a study circle program that would bring people of different racial backgrounds together. A combined total of nearly 600 people have participated in two rounds of study circles on race. Under the leadership of a new full-time executive director, LCPT is now launching a small number of study circles several times a year.

HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT
Community Conversations on Race

A 1997 report of the MetroHartford Millennium Project found that racial and ethnic divisions were economic as well as social issues and that unless these divisions were addressed, Hartford would not achieve its goal of becoming one of the top ten places to live and work. In response, leaders from the Secretary of State's Office, the National Conference for Community and Justice, Aetna Foundation, and the Millennium Project joined forces and developed a regional study circle program. So far, nearly 2,000 people have taken part in four rounds of study circles; most of these groups have taken place in workplaces.

INGLEWOOD, CALIFORNIA

In Inglewood — a community where 91 percent of the residents are people of color — approximately 600 parents, educators, and other concerned citizens participated in one round of study circles on the topic of education (1997-1998). This effort was mandated by the Superintendent and tied to principals' evaluations, as well as to the school district's strategic plan. In addition to improving relationships among parents of different racial and ethnic backgrounds and between parents and the schools, the study circle effort contributed to the successful passage of Measure K, which made $131 million available for school facilities improvements.

LIMA, OHIO

As the pioneer of the community-wide study circle model, Lima began its program in 1992 under the leadership of the Mayor's Office, Ohio State University/Lima, and local churches in response to local disturbances resulting from the Rodney King verdict. In the early years of the program, more than 1,000 people from 47 faith communities participated in multiple rounds of study circles on the topic of race. The program later expanded to include people in local businesses, neighborhood associations, and schools in discussions about race; this expansion brought the total number of participants to over 4,000 by mid-1999. Since 1995, people in Lima have also participated in study circles on the topics of violence and youth issues.

MAINE

In the state of Maine, nearly 50 rounds of study circles have taken place since 1991 on a wide variety of topics, including abortion, education reform, environmental priorities, and substance abuse; while accurate records do not exist, the researchers estimate that over 10,000 people have taken part in study circles in Maine. A large number of study circles have also taken place on a variety of topics with over 4,000 young people across the state, as part of a grant from the Lilly Endowment. Organizers at both the Maine Council of Churches and the independent organization they created in 1995 — The Roundtable Center — have promoted study circles as a way to foster a new kind of conversation on public issues and to encourage people to examine the moral and social overtones of these issues in a peaceable way.

NEW CASTLE COUNTY, DELAWARE
Study Circles on Racism and Race Relations

The YWCA of New Castle County developed a study circle program in 1996 as a way to address the part of its mission aimed at eliminating racism. Organizers also saw the program as a proactive approach to long-standing racial tensions. Although it has engaged nearly 100 community partners in the effort, the YWCA has remained the host and main organizer. To date, 3,400 people have taken part in four rounds of study circles on the topic of race; this includes 433 participants in study circles held at the Department of Labor.

NORTH LITTLE ROCK, ARKANSAS
Calling the Roll: Study Circles for Better Schools

As participants in the 1998 statewide research effort, *Calling the Roll*, North Little Rock organizers produced one round of study circles on the topic of education. These circles engaged 114 parents, students, teachers, school board members, and other citizens in discussions aimed at gathering public input on issues of education. School board members and the school district administration have taken responsibility for following up on participants' recommendations aimed at making the decision-making process for the district more accessible to members of the community.

OKLAHOMA

Balancing Justice
Calling the Roll: Study Circles for Better Schools

As one of two statewide efforts included in the study, Oklahoma hosted two rounds of study circles in 1996-1998. State staff members of the Oklahoma League of Women Voters and local League volunteers organized the effort, focusing first on the criminal justice system and later on education. For the round on *Balancing Justice*, 1,000 people in 13 communities participated; 500 people in 10 communities participated in the *Calling the Roll* effort. The first round of study circles led to major legislation reforming the state's criminal justice system.

SPRINGFIELD, ILLINOIS

Springfield Community-Wide Study Circles Program on Race Relations

Sensing race-based tension surrounding national events and local issues, in 1997 the mayor and other leaders in Springfield began developing a study circle program that would facilitate interaction and provide citizens with the opportunity to assist with the development of a plan to address the city's needs in the area of race relations. The first round of study circles on race took place in 1998, with 215 participants, 30 percent of whom were people of color; 80 people took part in a second round in 1999. In the third round, held in the spring of 2000, 150 people took part. Responsibility for organizing the study circles program has now shifted from the primary sponsorship of city government to the newly created Race Relations Task Force.

SYRACUSE, NEW YORK

Community Wide Dialogue on Ending Racism, Improving Race Relations, and Beginning Racial Healing

Study circles began in Syracuse in 1996 as a program of the InterReligious Council (IRC). The first round addressed this question: "What kind of community do we want for our children and how do we make it happen?" Because the roughly 300 participants in this round consistently identified the negative impact of racism on children's futures, the IRC decided to create and sponsor work that deals directly with several aspects of race. A diverse design team built a six-session guide for the Community Wide Dialogue, first used in the fall of 1997. About 750 people in Syracuse have now participated in study circles

aimed at ending racism, improving race relations, and beginning racial healing; study circles have been offered steadily throughout the year since 1998.

TWIN CITIES (MINNEAPOLIS AND ST. PAUL), MINNESOTA
Community Circles Collaborative

The Education and Housing Equity Project formed in Minneapolis in 1995 and joined forces with the Amherst Wilder Foundation in St. Paul in 1998 to promote the idea and experience of metropolitan citizenship. The collaboration is based on the two partners' mutual commitment to boosting citizen engagement in addressing the tough, interwoven problems of segregation and racial injustice as they impact on schools, housing, student achievement, and communities. Working with many collaborators, including professional facilitators who serve as civic partners in the effort, the Community Circles Collaborative has sponsored 80 study circles on the focal issues over three years, with approximately 1,200 people participating.

WOODRIDGE, ILLINOIS
Woodridge: Where Cultural Diversity is Our Strength

Late in 1997, both the Ecumenical Council in Woodridge and the DuPage Mayors and Managers Conference began encouraging the Village of Woodridge to take action to address the increasing diversity among the community's citizens. Local government responded by organizing a coalition and providing the support necessary to produce a round of study circles on diversity in the fall of 1998, with 120 people participating. Action forum participants identified 39 needed changes; the Village of Woodridge took responsibility for seeking organizations or groups willing to work on the recommendations.

(Throughout the study we refer to towns and cities without their state, to reduce unnecessary repetition.)

The following chapter provides a composite look at the "learning field" the 17 different communities presented, organized around five key factors.

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