

# Growth and Reasonable Spans of Care

By Peter Bowden

Recently I've started leading more workshops for leaders of existing small group ministries. One of the topics I discuss regularly is "span of care". Almost every time I use this term I get the following:

*"Span of what?"*

Span of care is one of those topics people gloss over when reading about small group ministry for the first time. Until you've done it, span of care issues tend to go in one ear and out the other.

The principle is quite simple. We have a finite amount of time, energy and attention. The more people we are given the responsibility of caring for, supporting, and connecting with the less of our time and attention they receive. Having a reasonable span of care means that we limit the number of people each person is responsible for. If we violate what Carl George calls a "workable" span of care leaders let things drop, get burned out, and the overall quality of care is diminished.

Your small group ministry's established span of care will impact not only the quality of your ministry, but the growth of your groups. Every group is made up of a set of relationships. Imagine that each person has at most ten quality relationships they can nurture. If you have a single leader responsible for the ministry of an entire group all of his or her relational and care capacity will be depleted. The last thing this leader will want to do is get involved in outreach, service projects, adding members, or anything else that might be seen as optional, ministry tasks included.

Many of the top small group authors (Carl George, Willow Creek, Donahue & Robinson) advocate for a span of care of ten for group leaders which is then shared with apprentices or co-leaders. What does this look like? Imagine that I am the leader of the group. Before our group meets for the first time I have a co-leader in place. From day one we each take responsibility for half of our group. These are the people we focus on building relationships with. Within our sub-group of up to four people we "do church" and maybe even some of life outside of church together. Within this core of four we identify at least one person to mentor as a leader.. Add this up and you end up with four people intentionally caring for the other four to six. In reality span of care is much less than ten. It is closer to four. At this level everyone has additional relational energy to spare. What do you do with this? Build up leaders and reach out to more people.

When a group has leaders working on building relationships with half the group outside of the group time, including building up a new co-leader, something happens. Over time two communities form outside of the primary group. While this group remains cohesive and has meaningful sessions, there are two distinct communities growing, each with a larger circle of friends, family and colleagues. It is the

growth of these two communities that gives rise to new groups. This is far different from adding people in groups until the group swells and then attempting to divide it. The energy in this ministry is focused between sessions, on two distinct community groups.

When you have strong relationships forming outside of the group in two clusters, group members know that the growth and division of their primary small group will not hurt their strongest relationships.

I like to call this "organic small group ministry". Groups grow apart in an organic way over time as authentic relationships are formed, new leaders are mentored and the sub communities discover new friends they would like to share the group experience with. To see this in action you must look at the relationships of the participants both in and outside of the group session. Too often we focus on the time when groups gather every other week or so.

If you look at a small group ministry system as an organic system of relationships and connections between living beings, any attempt to cut these relationships will be seen as a threat. The only way I've found to successfully divide groups, as opposed to forming new groups from scratch, is to love them apart. This takes two leaders and a clear vision for sharing both our faith and our lives.

Can this be done? Yes, but only with a very clear and well articulated vision for small group ministry. This is no simple add on program. At this level we are talking about an intentional system for doing ministry in a congregation, with Unitarian Universalists being in relationship with each other outside of group time and Sunday mornings. This is not about making new best friends, though that may happen. It is about being in strong relationship with other Unitarian Universalists *and newcomers* and being a people of faith together.

Take a moment and think about the people you spend quality time with outside of church. Who do you "do life" with? Are any of them in your small group? The small group ministries I know of that are thriving have, to a certain extent, crossed this line. The participants do more than just group sessions together. For some this is an exciting prospect, for others it is a gross violation of boundaries!

You can learn more about span of care in the following books. Review the material and discuss the span of care used, by accident or design, in your small group ministry.

Carl George, *The Coming Church Revolution*  
Chapter 3 – Workable Spans of Care

Donahue & Robinson, *Building a Church of Small Groups*  
Pages 45-49, 145-146, 180

Willow Creek, *Leading Life Changing Small Groups*  
Pages 23, 30, 72, 153, 168

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