

Covenant Group News is a free electronic newsletter on Small Group Ministry and Covenant Groups read by 1240 forward-looking Unitarian Universalists. Created by the Rev. Bob Hill, CGNews is edited by Peter Bowden and distributed by the UU Small Group Ministry Network.

→ Spread the news. Share the event announcements in this issue with small group leaders and participants.

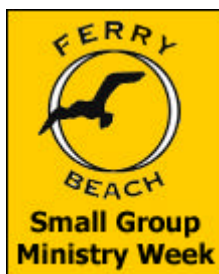
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Compilation of evaluations

Article from Rev. Bob Hill

Please Post

Please post the flier for the UU SGM Network Summer Institute at the Ferry Beach conference center. August 12 - August 18, 2006



Get the SGM Quarterly

Information on the SGM Quarterly and a membership form may be found at the end of CGNews.

The SGM Quarterly is now entering its THIRD YEAR of publication! This is the member journal of our network. It is mailed to homes and congregations four times per year.

Did you know...

Did you know that an estimated 75% of UUA congregations are now working with some form of small group ministry? Our network is the primary support for this ministry. Your membership makes our work possible.

Thank you!

Dear Friends,

Earlier this month I asked how CGNews readers evaluate their Small Group Ministry and Covenant Group programs. The result of this question is a new compilation of evaluations. We received some great responses. Read about this on page 2.

The Rev. Bob Hill, "the King of Covenant Groups", is spending a few years in Australia. On pages 3 & 4 you will find an article from Bob describing what churches "down under" are doing with Small Group Ministry.

Now a question. Do you have a bulletin board?

If you have one in your congregation we'd like your help. We are actively promoting our second UU Small Group Ministry Network Institute at Ferry Beach. This is a great opportunity for new and seasoned Small Group Ministry leaders, coordinators and ministers. You can help us spread the word by printing the flier on page 5 and posting it on your congregation's bulletin board.

I'm hoping to see a good 3% of you at Ferry Beach!

For those of you going to General Assembly this year, we still need volunteers to help with our SGM booth. If you LOVE small group ministry and will be at GA, join us! Volunteer to spend a shift at our booth. It is a great way to learn from others, spend time with our network board, and help inform people about this ministry. If you can help, please email M'ellen Kennedy at Mellen@smallgroupministry.net.

And last, what would CGNews be without a plug for joining our network! Since CGNews readers are a visionary lot, this will be easy. We can't support our association's resource hungry small group movement without your help. You can help by handing page 6 to a member of your SGM committee. See. That wasn't hard at all!

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Peter Bowden".

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Evaluating Small Group Ministries & Covenant Groups

A compilation of ideas and resources by Covenant Group News readers

Earlier this month I asked all of you Covenant Group News readers to share how you evaluate your programs. I have compiled the responses on our website. Note that my question was in response to a visitor to our website asking if we had any evaluation forms. At that time we did not. Thanks to all of you, we now have over a dozen evaluation forms! A special thanks to Ray for asking the question and to all of you who responded.

The URL of the compilation is:

<http://smallgroupministry.net/public/evaluation.html>

Here are a few thoughts on evaluations from my conversation with readers who wrote in.

Facilitator Meetings

Many congregations have group leaders meet with lay coaches and/or their minister(s) for ongoing training and support. This is a great way to keep groups focused, to share feedback, and do skill training. One reader asked if they needed to have formal evaluations in addition to these meetings.

Facilitator meetings are great for giving facilitators a chance to share their sense of how things are going. But a facilitator's perception may not always be accurate. If you want to know what group members think about their group, ask them. Chances are they will appreciate it.

Exit Interviews?

Considering the work congregations put into getting people INTO groups, I've been amazed at how few congregations follow up when people leave. When there is a problem with a group, if it is left unidentified and unresolved, it is common for people to drop out.

It is worth noting that many people leave groups because they think the group they were in was the only kind there is. "I tried Small Group Ministry and I didn't like it." If you have a program with multiple groups meeting with the same purpose (homogenous groups) a participant might think they are all the same. Every single group in your church is different.

Once when I was guest preaching I spoke with a man during coffee hour. He tried a group and didn't like it. I followed up. "What didn't you like about it?" I don't know what was scarier, his group experience or the fact that he thought this was what small group

ministry was meant to be like! After a five minute chat he was ready to give it another try.

Feedback in Groups

Many groups have a time for "Likes and Wishes" at the end of each session. This is a form of group process check. Some groups do this each session, others periodically, some never. If you give participants an opportunity to evaluate the group DURING the group time, consider the following from sales and marketing expert Harry Beckwith:

"A basic principle in life applies to surveying... Even your best friends won't tell you, but they will talk behind your back."

Could this possibly be true for Unitarian Universalists? Shocking! You better believe it.

Keep in mind that asking for feedback is also a sign of respect and shows that we care. Beckwith notes that when we ask for an opinion it shows that we value that person's opinion. We should all feel that our church values our opinion.

Other Feedback

While evaluations can identify problems or challenges, they can also highlight what you are doing well. Except for a handful of congregations, Small Group Ministry is NEW FOR ALL OF US. We should be learning what works, what doesn't, and strive to develop this ministry to the best of our ability. The only way to do this is to communicate with group leaders, participants, and even those who have yet to join a group.

Years Later...

When you evaluate your program consider checking in with your larger community. What's the understanding of small group ministry among those who are not in groups? Three years after your initial SGM launch do people still get it? Many congregations allow their Small Group Ministries to slowly fade into the background year by year. It is not easy keeping SGM front and center. When you ask non-participants what they know about this ministry it communicates to them that it is something important. It also lets you know how well you are educating members about your groups.

SMALL GROUP MINISTRY DOWN UNDER

An article by the Rev. Bob Hill

Small Group Ministries seem to be alive and well in Australia. A Google search limited to Aussie sites turns up more than 400,000 entries in a few seconds, and the on-line descriptions of what the various "down under" churches mean by SGM, although more Bible and Christ oriented than most of us tend to be, are very much in line with our understanding of Covenant Groups and their values.

The Croydon Hills Presbyterian Church in the state of Victoria, for example, lists six evening small groups and made up of "8-12 people of varied backgrounds and interests, ages and abilities, meeting weekly for one to two hours." These are "a vital and essential avenue of Ministry in our congregation."

New members are always welcome, the Croyden Hills web site says, and small group members "can testify to the tremendous benefits of personal friendships" established in these groups, but they are not "ends in themselves," and they are not "mini-churches." Their intent is spiritual growth, assistance in coping with every day life, and deeper relationships with others and with God.

The Blackburn North Baptist Church in a Melbourne suburb says it has more than 50 small groups that "meet weekly to study the Bible, discuss relevant matters and care for one another."

The hub of care

The Whitford Church in the Western Australian town of Mullaloo, near Perth, describes itself as "a church of small groups, not just a church with small groups." Their small groups are, they say, "the hub of care, outreach, discipleship, and learning" in their church. The groups meet every other week, or, as we're learning to say here, fortnightly.

The Pacific Parks Uniting Church, a three-year-old start-up in the state where Kristi and I are now living, Queensland, is seeking to use Small Groups Ministry as it works "mostly with the cultures of people in Gen X and Y generations in the North Gold Coast area."

Their web page says, "We're keen to create settings where people can connect to each other and God," and they sound a bit like a Unitarian Universalist fellowship group when they add that they hope this will happen "in informal settings where people just get together without much planning." However, they also say that for them small groups will be the context of Baptism and communion.

Problems like ours

A report in a newsletter for Sydney Anglicans quotes a minister who is going to "plant" a new church in northwest Sydney as saying "We actually encourage our people to see their small group as equally deserving of the "church" title." He notes that quite a few members of his previous parish, the Orange Evangelical Church, came by way of the small groups.

Quickly, though, he adds, "The larger gatherings and the smaller groups are both required for a healthy experience of church and for service opportunities."

SMALL GROUP MINISTRY DOWN UNDER continued...

Ridley College in Parksville, Victoria, which describes itself as "The Australian College of Theology, Proclaiming Christ Crucified," offers as an elective course in Small Group Ministry. It is described on

their web page as "a hands-on unit where the teaching is in the context of a real small group made up of the presenter and other class members. The aim of the subject is to introduce participants to the possibilities and challenges of this vital church ministry."

Judging by the discussions anticipated for this course, Australians have many of the same Small Group Ministry issues that Americans do, including "dealing with difficult members" and "multiplying and growing small groups."

The Orange Evangelical Church mentioned earlier asked their small groups to "come up with their own applications and strategies," but the church also encouraged the small groups to multiply themselves each year. The minister reported that the church had "limited success" with that goal.

Shared ministry

The John Marks Ministries offers training and consulting to Australian churches and they have published a column by a Baptist Pastor from New South Wales who sees SGM as a means of "decentralising" ministry. He wrote: "Instead of the Minister doing all the ministry, the ministry takes place within the life of the small groups. It is necessary to equip the lay people to do the ministry so that instead of one person doing all the ministry while the rest of the people are spectators, everyone is doing ministry, caring for each other and using their gifts."

Several Australian church web pages note that Small Group Ministry is not new, since Jesus had 12 disciples and the early Christian church "knew the value of meeting in small home groups for prayer, teaching and fellowship (Acts 2: 46, 5:42, 12: 1 - 17); Colossians 4: 15)."

And one web site noted that "Hebrews 10: 24 - 25 could well be the motto of our small groups:

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another - and all the more as you see the Day approaching."

Even those of us who are not so Bible oriented can "see the Day approaching," can see times ahead when we are likely to need each other as friends and companions on the way. That's true, it seems, in both hemispheres.

What about the Unitarian societies here? Most, including the one here in Brisbane that claims about 40 members, are affiliated with the British Unitarian Association. Their web pages show no awareness of Small Group Ministry, so far.

I was all set to visit the Brisbane group recently (having taken a bit of a holiday from church while getting settled here in this, for us, new country and culture where people drive on the wrong side of the road), but they've shut down for the summer break. I'll try again in February, which is said to be the hottest month of the year here.

Bob

Small Group Ministry Network Institute

August 12 – August 18, 2006

Ferry Beach, UU Conference Center Saco, Maine



The Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network is delighted to offer an opportunity for teams and individuals from congregations of all sizes to learn and practice Small Group Ministry (SGM) with experienced practitioners and leaders. The week will include presentations, hands-on workshops, small group ministry experience, sharing, networking, music and art. Topics will include:

- ❑ **Starting SGM from scratch in a congregation**
- ❑ **Expanding and enhancing existing SGM programs**
- ❑ **Exploring SGM in Lifespan Religious Education**
- ❑ **Preparing and supporting facilitators in their important work**
- ❑ **Revitalizing congregations with SGM**
- ❑ **Creating effective SGM sessions**
- ❑ **Helping ministers work comfortably and constructively with SGM**
- ❑ **Using art, music, movement and alternative approaches in SGM**
- ❑ **Exploring SGM as related to Social Justice and Faith in Action**
- ❑ **Sharing materials that participants bring from their congregations**
- ❑ **Taking home a vision and action plan for SGM**

Mornings will include presentations, discussion and workshops; evenings will have further optional programs and related activities. Afternoons are for relaxing on the beach, lounging on the porch, exploring the environs through organized outings, and other activities. **Participants will have the unique and uplifting opportunity of meeting daily in a hands-on small group.** The conference will be especially effective for groups representing their congregations and all are welcome.

Instructors include: Rev. Calvin O. Dame, Rev. Helen Zidowecki, Dr. M'ellen Kennedy, MDiv, Peter Bowden, Elizabeth Barrett, Rev. Marti Keller and others.

Imagine enjoying the beach, worshipping among the pines, making new friends, sensing our history, and participating in rejuvenating our Unitarian Universalist movement with Small Group Ministry – all in a week this summer!

Comments From Last Year's Ferry Beach Participants:

"Outstanding presenters. It went beyond my expectations. Great conference and facility."

"It offered experiences I did not expect – surpassed my expectations. Small groups were wonderful. I'm taking back a deeper sense of what is possible for how we relate with each other, for our program, and what transformation might look like for our church community."

"The staff of this workshop have such amazing gifts, knowledge and excitement, that I want to see all this more widely shared!"

"I'll go back with ideas on how to design and implement the SGM program in my congregation, solid concepts and practical experience gleaned from others."

"Thank you, thank you. It was a powerful experience for me personally and I'm looking forward to sharing what I've learned with my congregation. Thank you for all the work and care you took in putting together a meaningful and practical conference."

"I'm bringing home more organization for our SGM program, and inspiration and tools to make it better."

To register and for more information, visit www.ferrybeach.org

UU Small Group Ministry Network Quarterly

Join the UU Small Group Ministry Network and you will receive the SGM Quarterly in the mail four times per year and online access to all previous issues.

Our last issue had a focus on **The Language of Reverence**

The next issue will focus on Theme is **How SGM Impacts the Congregation**

New memberships postmarked **May 31st** will be included in this SGM Quarterly mailing.

CGNEWS READERS: Please share this form with your congregation's Small Group Ministry leadership. At present our network is the primary organization supporting this ministry in our entire association. Every day we receive calls for help and requests for resources which we can't presently address. To develop the resources our congregations are hungry for we need EACH CONGREGATION working with small group ministry and covenant groups to join. We need your help.

If you have a Small Group Ministry, include a membership to our network in your budget for this ministry. If you don't have a budget for this ministry, start one with a SGM Network membership.

UU SGM Network Membership Form

Please select a membership

- ☐ Individual Membership \$35 Includes 1 copies of the SGM Quarterly
- ☐ Congregational Membership \$60 Includes 6 copies of the SGM Quarterly

Name _____

Phone _____

Email Address _____

Congregation _____

Mailing Address _____

Optional donation to assist in funding our support of small group ministry:

Please Circle \$5 \$10 \$25 \$50 \$100 \$250 Other \$ _____

Total Enclosed – Male checks payable to **“UU SGM Network”** \$ _____

Send your completed membership form with check made payable to “UU SGM Network” to:

UU SGM Network , C/O Peter Bowden
155 Evarts Street, Newport, RI 02840