

"BEYOND GETTING STARTED" GATHERING AT GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Covenant Group News, October 15, 2003 and October 17, 2003

About 40 professional and lay leaders in Small Group Ministry gathered during General Assembly in Boston in June 2003 to discuss developing and sustaining Covenant Groups in our congregations.

Called "Beyond Getting Started," this conference was sponsored by the Center for Community Values (CCV), a not-for-profit educational institute that serves as a resource center and networking facilitator for people engaged in Covenant Group work.

What follows is Part One of a two-part report transcribed from notes taken at that meeting. The quotations, of course, are not exact and have been edited for brevity and

INTRODUCTION

The Rev. Dr. Thandeka, CCV Co-President and Associate Professor of Theology and Culture at Meadville/Lombard Theological School and Affiliated Minister at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Rockford, IL, began the discussions by saying, "Small Group Ministry is a spiritual practice for Unitarian Universalists. It is a sacramental act because it engenders and sustains feelings of acceptance, trust, and wellbeing and motivates service to others. Small Group Ministry is a spiritual journey for us. We have come together to deepen this spiritual work through thoughtful reflections and shared insights. Our work is to heal ourselves, each other, and the world."

CONTENT

Julia Rodriguez, CCV Director of Outreach and chair of the Small Group Ministry Council and SGM Content Team at First Unitarian Church of San Jose, CA, identified four major challenges of providing content for Small Group Ministry:

- To make content meaningful, varied, and of consistent quality
- To enable ministry
- To provide structure for relationship building for all kinds of people
- To develop a common foundation of story

"The content of the sessions sets the tone for the whole program," she said. "The kind of care you give to content will be reflected in everything. Good content motivates people to show up. Content is the vehicle for the relationship building within groups."

San José's Content Team, in consultation with the church's ministers, has written more than 60 session plans that fall into four types: 1) general, 2) seasonal, 3) life rituals, and 4) group milestones. Groups tend to synchronize with each other in the use of topics. "This helps foster all-church conversation," Rodriquez says, adding, "Sharing is not confidential unless confidentiality is requested."

Each session includes three items: an order of worship, leader notes, and preparation. The formal order of worship distinguishes these Covenant Groups from discussion groups and social gatherings. "The order of worship provides a fairly formal structure," Rodriquez says. "This has the advantage of providing a place for some of our 'special grace needed' members. They are able to contribute within the structure, where they might have problems in a looser context. We even go so far as to recommend the appropriate style of sharing for a particular session."

Session plans to mark the milestones of groups include: starting the group, birthing a new group, adding new members, the departure of members, and a session to reflect on the group itself.

Groups that are just starting are asked to use four session plans designed to help the group bond while introducing the concepts of our Small Group Ministry. "Each session increases the depth and risk of the topic," Rodriquez says. "We find that groups that skip the four sessions are more fragile. Groups will often return to the four beginning sessions as a group-strengthener."

Rodriquez believes the church's team approach has led to varied session content and encouraged insights and innovations. Team leadership also provides continuity in times of ministry transition.

Responses to Rodriquez's remarks:

Art Silver, Shelter Rock congregation, New York: Our group responds to activity more than to talking. For example, the group members brought meaningful objects, constructed an altar with candles, and each told about the object and its meaning.

Laura Schlatter, Unity Church, St. Paul, MN: Our program is one year old, and we have 200 participants. A leadership team of 10 people supports facilitators and does training. Curriculum has been prepared through the first year, with the goal that participants progress to more challenging, deep, theological questions. Not everybody wanted to use them.

Thomas Mikelson, minister, First Parish, Cambridge, MA: Our covenant group program started three years ago. Stories we had heard at GA were more glowing than what we have experienced. ... We have four Covenant Groups with 30 people, and many other types of small groups. Our questions have to do with where to aim for the future. What role should Covenant Groups have in relation to other groups? How Small Group Ministry council should relate to the Program Council?

LEADERSHIP

The Rev. Bob Hill, CCV advisor and District Executive of the Southwest District, spoke on leadership and quoted the Rev. Jim Robinson in saying, "The secret of leadership training is to choose the right leaders in the first place."

The combination of careful selection, training, and monthly sessions with each other in Covenant Groups for facilitators, however, is producing a crop of motivated and enthusiastic leaders for our congregations. We are, in effect, training "deacons," he said, lay leaders with special powers and responsibilities. "This means that we have to pay attention to accountability as well," he said, "including making sure our facilitators are aware of the ethical issues associated with leadership roles in a church."

Ministerial leadership, Hill believes, is crucial for a successful Small Group Ministry. What about churches that have ministers who are not enthusiastic about covenant group ministry? "Give them my book and information from Dame and Turner and the CCV," he advised, "but don't start a Covenant Group program unless and until your minister is enthusiastic about doing that."

Responses to Hill's remarks:

Henry Tichnor, summer minister, Fairfax VA: The key words here are "shared ministry." Reluctant ministers need to be reassured that this is not something else put on their plates, and that this is not in place of something else.

Gail Forsyth-Vail, Religious Education, North Parish, North Andover, MA: We have intergenerational groups. One group is led by youth and is one-half youth and one-half adults. Our youth group is using Covenant Group format. When "bridgers" met, their parents also met. Their common experience allowed instant depth.

Tera Little, Pacific Southwest District Program consultant: Different generations have different needs for leadership and programming.

The Rev. Calvin Dame, minister, Augusta, ME: We have 14 groups. One group of people in their 70s meets during the day. Family groups have kids wandering in and out; it's good for kids to see us discussing important things. Groups rise from different parts of the congregation.

Peter Bowden, Covenant Group newsletter publisher, RI: Youth work better with emergent curriculum where they generate the ideas. Young adults can do outreach.

INTEGRATION

How do we keep Covenant Groups integrated with instead of isolated from the life of the church? How do we integrate the positive feeling generated by Covenant Groups into the life of the church? These were questions asked and addressed by the Rev. Michael McGee, CCV Co-President and Lead Team Minister at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Arlington, VA.

"We have a year-long theme for worship services and Covenant Groups," McGee said. "Covenant Groups use sermons on the theme as a basis for discussion and the religious education chapel services use the same themes. This way there are common topics for youngest to oldest."

Organizing and taking part in service projects for the community or the church each year is an expectation of Covenant Groups in the Arlington church. McGee says, "This helps groups to bond and keeps them from being overly insulated by giving them a purpose beyond themselves. Many groups have chosen to do their projects in the church, which has helped them to feel a deeper attachment and to become more knowledgeable about church life."

He also said, "I consider one of the primary purposes of Small Group Ministry to be leadership training. I draw more and more for leadership in the church from our covenant group leaders who have been trained in facilitating a healthy process that values and affirms all participants. I am finding that group participants also make more productive church members who are more likely to be involved in other church programs, bringing with them the Small Group Ministry philosophy."

An annual potluck for all covenant group participants helps people be more aware that our Small Group Ministry is a major part of the congregation's life.

Responses to McGee's remarks these:

Laura Schlatter: Service projects are good for the group and good for the congregation (for example putting together toiletry kits for women released from prison).

Renee Silver, Shelter Rock: Integration occurs during check-in when people make reference to sermon. Participation in projects has not been too successful. Most covenant group participants are very active in the congregation and are serving in many other ways.

Jill McAllister, minister, Kalamazoo, MI: Religious education teachers are forming Covenant Groups, meeting around curriculum in response to content, asking "what do I know that I can share?"

Laura Schlatter: We asked Covenant Groups if they were willing to use one session for a program collecting stories about the church. Many were willing to serve the church in that way and scheduled an extra session.

Calvin Dame: We used Covenant Groups once for mission writing process. The purpose of the groups is spiritual nurture, and we head off people asking Covenant Groups to do tasks such as the annual canvass. One

of the functions of the Small Group Ministry steering committee is to protect the groups. Don't use the groups for "organizational" purposes.

Peter Bowden: Groups are for spiritual issues and spiritual reflection, not the politics of the church agenda.

Art Silver, Shelter Rock: Group members are looking for answers to questions. Don't use Covenant Groups for other purposes. Mutual sharing is meaningful. Don't bring in problems of the congregation at large.

Jennifer Nichols Payne, Southwest District Religious Education Consultant: Covenant Groups are a tool for growth, integrating people into the congregation. One way is to always leave an open seat. Is a group closed by bonding, or do we invite people in?

Henry Tichnor: As a project, one group sponsored a dinner for all Covenant Group members to celebrate the year. Every person took a minute to describe who they are. They compared their groups in different ways. This event fostered integration among the Covenant Groups.

Calvin Dame: You can trust that anything important in the life of the church is going to be processed.

GROWTH

The Rev. Calvin Dame, CCV Advisor and minister of the Unitarian Universalist Community Church, Augusta, ME, began by saying, "If we can move people into Covenant Groups, we can keep them."

He cited an Alban Institute view that there is a describable process of joining a church:

1. Step across the threshold.
2. Get kids into accessible religious education; attend worship service.
3. Within six weeks know people beyond coffee hour.

4. Have interaction with minister (minister looks them in the eye and sees them)
5. Decision: Is there consonance in this church between what is preached from the pulpit and what happens in the fellowship hall?

Two out of ten visitors were staying long enough to become part of the Augusta church and membership had plateaued at 165 members when the church adopted Small Group Ministry with a goal of keeping three of ten visitors.

"The congregation committed itself to growth. The goal was to have more Unitarian Universalists in Augusta. There was a commitment to change paradigm to "We are a Small Group Ministry church," Dame said, adding: "Groups are accessible. Sunday welcome by lay leaders includes invitation to Covenant Groups. Every newsletter has something about Covenant Groups. Half of church members belong to Covenant Groups. It is the job of the group to integrate new members."

Angela Merkert, Congregational Services Director, Central Midwest District, had several questions: How many congregations are moving with the principle of breaking off new groups? Many are not dividing. Does this stymie the process of growth?

Dame's answer: Groups do not want to split. If we have five people and a facilitator we start a group. A group grows up to nine. If a church is committed to growth, it takes a different way of thinking about the church.

Julia Rodriguez observed that two San Jose groups have split so far.

Responses to Dame's remarks included these:

Renee Silver, Shelter Rock: One of a group's covenants is to divide. We divided up a group of 16. They divided themselves, and half went with each leader.

Doug Kraft, Sacramento: With 10 or 11 groups, the facilitators group divided and two other groups divided. Dividing is part of the covenant, part of the program.

McGee: We hold New UU sessions three times per year, and try to start a new Covenant Group from each New UU group.

Doug Kraft: Facilitators are chosen and trained. The first group was trained for six months; after that only those who have been in groups can be facilitators.

Michael McGee: We hold a half-day training in the fall. Co-facilitators start new groups.

Tera Little: In coffee hour people don't talk to each other. What about intentional hospitality training?

Calvin Dame: If you want to belong to a friendly church you have to be friendly. This is an ongoing role.

Jennifer Brower, Shelter Rock: Splitting can be talked about in positive ways: "growing," "birthing." Growth is in numbers and in depth of connection and commitment.

Peter Bowden: We're asking people to let us cut their community in half. At Willow Creek they seduce people into two groups. The facilitator chooses an apprentice; the facilitator and apprentice each take five people to take care of and shepherd like a "cruise director." Group starts to cluster into two groups.

In Providence three young adult groups grew out of one.

VISION

McGee closed the session with a statement about vision:

- Our vision for CCV, for the Center for Community Values, is that we will support and spread the powerful and empowering structure of Small Group Ministry. We will accomplish this mission so that individuals will embrace a renewed spirit of community; awaken to a deeper spiritual life; and be moved to a genuine compassion to serve others.
- Second, we will help churches to build successful Small Group Ministry so that congregations will become: more caring communities of people who minister to each other and build healthy congregations; spiritual communities of people who seek to move into deeper dimensions of being; compassionate communities, seeking to heal and give hope to the world.
- Third, we will help build a vast, planetary network of Small Group Ministry so that the world will be transformed by people who: experience the universal bond of community; are spiritually empowered to live out their highest values and deepest beliefs; work for systemic change to alleviate inequity and oppression.

This is our vision, this is our hope, and this is our expectation.

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