

Covenant Groups... What Are They?

Rev. Robert (Bob) Hill, *Covenant Group News*, November 1, 1998

Covenant Groups, as I am defining them, have the following five characteristics:

1. **SIZE** – The ideal is for each group to have about 10 people and Covenant Groups should never have more than 14 members. [Later Bob changed the maximum to 10. Editor]
2. **FREQUENCY** of meeting – At least once a month.
3. **FORMAT** – Covenant Groups begin with centering, followed by a check-in. When each person has had a chance to speak briefly about her or his day, week, or situation in life at the moment, the business or function of the group begins. A few minutes before closing time, each person is asked to say, in a word or phrase, how he or she is feeling as the meeting closes. Then there is a brief closing. More about format later.
4. **LEADERSHIP** – Each Covenant Group is led by a woman or man chosen and trained by the minister of the sponsoring church.
5. **TWO COVENANTS** – With the help of the leader, each group must define how the members intend to relate to each other and how they, as a group, will serve their church.

Those are the bare-bones requirement. Most churches have small groups, but a small group is not a Covenant Group unless it has these five characteristics. There is, I believe, magic in Covenant Groups and the magic depends on all five points.

WHERE'S THE MAGIC?

You can see the magic any Sunday you're free to visit a church like the Fellowship Church in Grapevine, TX, just north of Dallas-Fort Worth Airport. Their sanctuary holds 3,000 and it was packed the July

Sunday when I visited. It's a church organized around small groups, and it is that way of doing church -- not its conservative Christian theology, not its high-tech and well-staffed professional worship service -- that lets Fellowship Church claim a membership of 5,000.

Fellowship Church's success is built on what author Carl F. George calls "meta-church" techniques. These small-group organizing principles were pioneered in this country by the founders of the Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois, more than 25 years ago.

George uses "meta-" as it is used in "metamorphosis" and intends "meta-church" to mean "change church," but he also ties the term to church groups of about 10 adults meeting at least monthly during the week with a trained lay leader who regularly "huddles" with the minister(s).

WESLEY GROUPS

Long before Willow Creek brought meta-church techniques to evangelical Christian churches in this country, however, there were Wesley Groups. The phenomenal success of early Methodism hinged, in part, on a similar means of organization fostered by John Wesley in the 1700s in England.

Early Methodists depended on what were called "class meetings." There were some larger meetings and even some smaller ones, but "class meetings" were groups of about 10 to 12 that met in homes. Their focus was the spiritual condition of the 10 or 12. Currently, there are Wesley Fellowship groups modeled on these "class meetings."

The Rev. Donald Fielding suggested the term "Covenant Groups" for our attempts to mine

the ore of these approaches, and he is applying these techniques now to his Dallas church, Oak Cliff UUF. By whatever name and regardless of the theology of the group using them, these methods have shown themselves to be powerful.

The largest Unitarian Universalist Church on the planet, All Souls in Tulsa, is using small-group organization techniques under the leadership of the Rev. Dr. Brent Smith. They've grown from about 1,000 adult members to about 1,500 since Brent began using meta-church-like techniques.

In Brewster, MA, the Rev. James Robinson has been using small-group organization of this sort since 1982 and his church has grown seven-fold to nearly 1,000 adults and children, which means that one in every 20 people in that area are now Unitarian Universalist.

MEETING TWO FUNDAMENTAL NEEDS

Small-group organization works magic because carefully-led small groups meet two fundamental human needs.

- A. People come to our churches to be lifted out of the ordinary, to be drawn up from the mundane, and to seek relief (preferably in an interactive way) from the omnipresent materialism of our culture.
- B. People, living in our society of frequent re-locations and diminished family support, come to our churches to find friends, community, "a place where everybody knows your name."

Covenant Groups provide for both those needs in ways that our Sunday services, coffee hours, committee meetings, Dinners for Eight, and other gatherings cannot. Proof that the organizational model most of us are currently using does not meet these needs well is in our statistics.

We've been using the same basic way of doing church for 150 years and more. The result? According to an analysis by campaign consultant Jerry King, Unitarian Universalists in the United States and Canada account for one person out of every 1,881 in the population. The ratio is significantly worse now than it was at merger in 1961. On our own continent, we are out-numbered by Sikhs. It doesn't have to be so. Remember Brewster's ratio? One in 20.

There's a better way of doing church than the one we've been wedded to forever. It's a radically different way.

Some Thoughts From Carl George

Bob Hill

Covenant Group News, March 16, 1999
From *The Coming Church Revolution: Empowering Leaders for the Future*, Carl F. George, with Warren Bird, Baker Book Company, Grand Rapids, MI, 1995.

"One of the goals of a Meta-Church and of any effective organizational system: to assure the highest level of care at the lowest level in the structure. And the more effective the structure is, the more the ministry is shared between paid staff and volunteer leaders." (p. 57)

"Doing things right is a far less important factor than doing the right things. Anything worth doing is worth doing imperfectly. Anybody can tell when something is perfect. The harder test, requiring more maturity, is to discern when it is good enough. Most church-based instruction is so focused on perfection that we completely lose sight of what is important: the motivation to learn." (P. 88)