

DEEP UU GROUPS, Cleveland, OH

The Rev. Michael McGee of the West Shore UU Church in Cleveland has begun two Covenant Groups there under the title "Deep UU" groups. Not only is their title unique, but their approach emphasizes soothing music at the start and soft lighting throughout the meeting.

"I think it is important to emphasize that there is no standard way to do this," Michael says. "Each group will find its own way." I agree and I also note that the Deep UU Groups do have the essentials: leaders and a format that includes check-ins and check-outs and inspirational or centering readings to start and close.

Michael sent the following report of what is happening so far at West Shore. Call it:

UNTIL WE TAKE OVER THE WORLD --We've just started the Covenant Group process, and it is going well. We call ours "Deep UU Groups," meaning that we intend to be dealing with deep issues.

One is led by Paul Beedle, our intern from last year who is now a chaplain. This group is for those who have signed the membership book during the past year or two. It's an opportunity for our new members to get to know each other better and to discuss deep spiritual issues. There are 10 new members involved in this one.

I lead the second group with our Minister of Religious Education, the Rev. Midge Skwire. We hand-picked this group of leaders. None are board members, but they are members who have been involved in many different committees and tasks.

What many of them feel that they have missed has been the opportunity for spiritual leadership. We received an enthusiastic "Yes!" from all but one person. Only one person has missed a meeting so far, and that was because he was out of town.

We hope some of those in this year's groups will be the leaders of Deep UU Groups in the fall. Midge, Paul, and I are trying to model good leadership skills like not letting anyone talk too much or too little and keeping the group on task. We want to use two leaders per group, at least for their first group-leadership experience.

Both of these groups meet once a month, and that seems to work well. Our format is:

- 7:15 p.m. -- Relaxing music is playing while people arrive and the lights are turned down (the lights are down for the entire time and it really seems to relax people). Everyone has been told that no church business is to be done before, during or after meetings, so they tend to chat a little with each other and then sit and wait quietly for the group to start.
- 7:30 -- We agreed to start and end on time, so at 7:30 the person who volunteered at the last meeting to do the worship begins with a brief reading, then a few words about what that reading means to him or her, followed by silence and the lighting of the chalice.
- 7:40 -- Check in. This is very important. We ask people to respond to the question: "How have you been since the last meeting?"
- 8:00 - Conversation. Midge or I will introduce a question for the group to consider with a few introductory words and perhaps a short reading. The question for the first night was:

"Why did you say yes to the invitation to join the group?" The question for the second meeting was: "What place does silence have in your life?" Both questions worked well to get people into deep discussions. There is no shortage of good questions to ask.

We had to do a little coaching to keep people from getting too intellectual and to speak with "I" statements instead. Telling stories from their own life is encouraged, and there have been some powerful ones. At the end of both evenings it was difficult to stop the conversation.

- 9:20 -- Recruit worship leader for next meeting and then check out. "How do you feel about tonight's meeting?" or "What is one thing you appreciated about tonight's meeting?" in a word or sentence. (People tend to say a little more than that, but we have no problem with that.)
- 9:25 -- Ending worship. The person who did the opening worship reads from a meaningful source, says a little about what those words mean to the individual, invites silence and then extinguishes the flame.
- 9:30 -- End. People tend to stay around for a while and chat with each other.

We also hope this group will become our Deep UU Committee. At our May meeting we will ask participants to give feedback about the group and help us plan for the fall. Our hope is that we will have four groups start in the fall and go through the year and that more leaders will come out of those groups for the following year until we take over the world.