

Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network
EVOLUTION OF SMALL GROUP MINISTRY

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Part 1 -Making Small Group Ministry Unitarian Universalist

CGN October 2011

Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry was not created overnight. Last October I presented a workshop on Small Group Ministry at the Unitarian Universalist History and Heritage Convocation in Massachusetts. My focus was on capturing a movement as it was happening. I realized that the history of Small Group Ministry/Covenant Groups was an evolution. Actually, various stages of evolution. And it is still evolving. *You are reading this, you are part of the evolution!*

This issue of *CG News* includes consideration of the "First Evolution: Making Small Group Ministry Unitarian Universalist." This article has evolved from the Convocation through the 2011 SGM Institute, to a sermon in Chattanooga in October 2011. Subsequent CGN editions will include the "Second Evolution: From the Small Group to the Congregation" and "Third Evolutions: Small Group Ministry for Everyone."

The First Evolution started in the late 1990's. There was a concern about the lack of numeric congregational growth. Rev. Bob Hill, Executive Director of the Southwest District, and Rev. Glenn Turner, of the Northeast District (namely Maine), started looking at this growth issue. What draws people to a congregation, and what keeps them connected? Both Bob and Glenn were aware of a statement made about 1980 by James Luther Adams, a prominent Unitarian Universalist minister, that people come looking for *Intimacy* and *Ultimacy*.

This tied in with the work of Kennon Callahan (not a Unitarian Universalist), namely *The Twelve Keys to an Effective Church*. Callahan focused on the *relational keys* and the *functional keys*. The logistics of keeping a church running (functional keys) were to support people and connections (relational keys). Glenn Turner introduced this work to the congregations in the Northeast District.

Add to the desire for growth and the focus on the relational, the work of Carl George (an evangelical Christian leader) focused on the Meta-Church, or the church in transition. The Meta-Church movement focused on groups of 10 people within congregations or congregations made up of small groups. The title of Bob Hill's book, "The Complete Guide to Small Group Ministry: Saving the World, Ten at a Time", is a direct connection to this evangelical approach. Several Unitarian Universalist congregations were using small groups in various ways. It was the focus of Bob and Glenn on these factors - growth, relations grounded in Intimacy and Ultimacy, and the use of small groups - that created Covenant Groups (Bob Hill's term) and the Small Group Ministry (Glenn Turner's term) movement.

But I doubt that even the work of Bob and Glenn would have had this much impact if it were not for the development of shared ministry. This intentional sharing of ministry between clergy and laity changed "ministry" being the purview of the minister to the inclusive responsibility of the congregation. (In Augusta, Maine, we had a Pastoral Care Associate training in 1997. We started working on Small Group Ministry in 1998. Connection or coincidence?)

This First Evolution transformed the theories and methodologies developed by others into a model that was accessible for Unitarian Universalists through our own literature, our own

terminology. The intimacy is undoubtedly part of the use of small groups within various faith traditions. The uniqueness of Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry may be in the ultimacy or the search for meaning that is grounded in our varied life and spiritual journeys, rather than creeds.

The model itself evolved as congregations implemented Small Group Ministry. Key factors for successful programs seemed to emerge, even with variation in implementation. The Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network started defining the basic elements of the model several years ago.

*This model is described by its name - Small (up to 10 people) in a Group (with commitment, over time) Ministry (caring and being present for each other along life's journeys).

*The model focuses on Intimacy and Ultimacy

*This model is based on the concept of covenant, or the promises that we make to each other and the congregation to be in right relations, in openness in groups, and in serving this and the larger community.

*This model includes leadership development and support .

* See the UU SGM Network website: <http://www.smallgroupministry.net/basiclements.html> for a full description of the small group ministry basics that the UU SGM Network recommends be included in your church's model.

For the more complete history of Small Group Ministry/Covenant Groups, see Network publications, such as *Ten Years of Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry*.

Part 2 -- From the Small Group to the Congregation --

CGN November 2011

The October issue of *CGNews* included "First Evolution: Making Small Group Ministry Unitarian Universalist." This issue focuses on the "Second Evolution: From the Small Group to the Congregation." The "Third Evolutions: Small Group Ministry for Everyone" will be in the January edition.

The *Second Evolution* moves from the person and the single group to the broader congregation. Participants in small group ministry learn a different way of being with each other, through listening, sharing, and being present. *Small group ministry, done well in the respective groups, changes how people interact beyond the group itself.* How you minister to each other--and yourselves--matters.

I do not recall talking in the early years about the impact that small group ministry would have on congregations, beyond keeping people connected, that would result in growth and increased pastoral care. However, congregations reported starting intentional personal check-in at the beginning of meetings, and check-out during or at the end of gatherings - paying attention to where we are in our own lives, even as we do the work of the church. A coincidence? I don't think so.

Increased listening to others and sharing our own thought from the heart as our own, without needing to defend, argue or persuade, brought a gentleness in communication at general congregational meetings. I personally realized this after attending a couple of congregational forums to address some critical issues in my home congregation. Some hard things had been said in ways that people could hear without becoming defensive. We had learned to listen in small groups. In reality, small group ministry has transformed the congregation.

Congregational issues should not become part of small group ministry conversation per se. However, a session can provide a deeper way to consider themes of congregational life. Samples of specific session plans include: Congregational Change, Transitions in Leadership, the Mission and Vision of the church, Sacred Space, etc. Such session plans can be used by ongoing groups or developed for special meetings.

Session Plans are frequently developed as responses to broader cultural and societal events and issues. These include:

Events that impact all of us, such as September 11 or the Knoxville shooting
Acts of nature, such as earthquakes, hurricanes and tornadoes
Cultural factors, such as economic issues

Small group ministry is being recognized and held up in conjunction with many areas of our Unitarian Universalist experience. Within the larger UU world:

*Small group ministry session plans are developed as resources for considering GA resolutions.

*The Unitarian Universalist Service Committee develops session plans around a number of their focuses.

*And the UU Small Group Ministry Network is working on session plans around planning for, responding, and reflecting on immigration and other social justice issues for General Assembly in June 2012.

What we do in the Small Group Ministry/Covenant Group sessions matters.

How we implement Small Group Ministry as part of overall congregational life matters.

And as more people become involved with Small Group Ministry, there is an impact on Unitarian Universalism overall.

All because Small Group Ministry expands beyond the individual group!

Part 3: Small Group Ministry for Everyone--

CGN February 2012

First Evolution: Making Small Group Ministry Unitarian Universalist is from an evangelical model to a vital Unitarian Universalist model for congregations (CGN, Oct. 2011). The *Second Evolution: From the Small Group to the Congregation* is learning a different way of being with each other in small groups that affects the entire congregation (CGN Nov. 2011).

But I believe that we are in the *Third Evolution*. This is expectation and entitlement. People are increasingly coming to our congregations looking for Small Group Ministry. People go to websites looking for Small Group or Covenant Group Ministry. Or they find the description that invites connections. Visibility! Expectations!

Michael Durall, who works with churches in various denominations, noted in his article "Small Group Ministry: A Requirement for Church Membership" [Small Group Ministry Quarterly, Fall 2010](#) that in some churches there is expectation that new members will participate in a specific number of sessions, with invitation to join ongoing groups in some UU congregations. He describes three levels of Small Group Ministry: 1) for newcomers to get to know the church, the faith and fellow congregants; 2) growing deeper in the faith; and 3) outreach and service that comes from being part of the faith community. These certainly seem applicable to UU congregations. So what are our expectations?

There are benefits of having everyone be part of Small Group Ministry. This becomes a way of "doing church" and makes Small Group Ministry a part of the congregational function. But a major tenant of our tradition is *choice* -- to join or not. In reality, ministry and the deep listening may not be what a person wants or can relate do. Or an individual may be looking for something else from a group, such as therapy, or an educational focus or more social focus.

However, I challenge congregations to work toward developing and making Small Group Ministry *available* and *accessible* to as many people as possible. What does this mean?

*There will be a commitment of resources (time, financial resources and leadership development) by congregation.

*Specific attention is given to factors of diversity, accessibility, and people with special considerations: transportation, physical needs (including allergies), child care, time of meeting options.

*People need to be allowed to not participate without judgment, so that the creation of two congregations (those in and those not in small group ministry) is avoided. This is accompanied by an ongoing invitation to connect with Small Group Ministry at any time.

And there is the intentional focus: making groups available to all ages: There are resources for including Small Group Ministry with younger children and youth, young adults, adults, and at the other end of the continuum, for later life and elders. . And the possibility of having groups of mixed ages - youth and adults together, family groups, and groups for parents. The potential is explored in the Network publication, **Small Group Ministry With All Ages**.

Let's make Small Group Ministry a *viable option* for everyone connected with our congregations as members or friends!