

An Expertise Without Experts

Bob Hill, *Covenant Group News*, February 8, 1999 (excerpts)

There is an underlying belief at work here, and it is that people choose to participate in churches in order to (a) be lifted out of their ordinary lives to higher considerations and experiences and (b) find friends, for themselves and their children.

And, there is a further purpose, which is to extend and leverage ministry by having each minister train lay persons to be more intentional and effective in ministering to others, and then staying in close touch with the resulting interactions.

So, there is necessary expertise, but there are few or no experts among us. The Baptists' Willow Creek church in Illinois has been using similar techniques for 25 years or so. Jim Robinson in our church in Brewster, MA, has been using these methods since the early 1980s. Brent Smith introduced the concept to All Souls in Tulsa more than five years ago. Glenn Turner has been promoting these techniques vigorously for a few months in the Northeast.

But most of us are just getting started. We have a lot to learn from non-Unitarian Universalist church folk, from the handful of us with experience, and from each other, as we succeed and fail in living up to the dream of Covenant Group possibilities.

I'm seeking to be an evangelist for this idea and to provide a source of information and shared experience. But I'm certainly no expert. My only first-hand experience of starting and running Covenant Groups is with Northwest Community Church in Houston, a three-year-old church I serve on a very part-time basis. We have one Covenant Group under way and succeeding (meeting twice a month in homes), another is getting started, and a third is being planned, but we have no big news to report so far.

I have been talking with some others who have Covenant Group programs planned or started, though, and some of what I've learned follows.

West Shore, Cleveland "Wider and Deeper UUism" is the term being used to designate Covenant Groups at West Shore Church in Cleveland, OH. The Rev. Michael McGee, minister, and the Rev. Marjorie Skwire, minister of religious education, are working together to train and guide leaders of Wider and Deeper Groups now getting underway.

Oak Cliff, Dallas Seven Covenant Groups are getting started in this church, which has suffered a slow decline for a number of years, in part because of its building's location. The seven include groups focused on philosophy, travel, singing, meditation and prayer, dining in restaurants (single folk), games, and nature walks.

The church's minister, the Rev. Don Fielding, says he invited suggestions for groups some months ago and got lots of them. Members willing to facilitate first meetings were invited to be part of a demonstration group, which Don conducted as a Covenant Group.

Don expects each group to choose its own leader at the end of the first meeting. Those leaders will be asked to meet with Don at least once each quarter and stay in touch more often when there is need. The groups will meet for two to two and a half hours at least once a month, mostly in homes.

"We've already had one group that didn't come together," Don said recently, "and I have no idea how many of these seven will be functioning six months from now, but even if it's only two or three, we'll be way ahead."