

## **UU President Morales' Vision As Seen Through Small Group Ministries**

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We are at a crossroads in American religious life. While millions yearn for a spiritual home and for community, most people don't belong to a religious institution. The major denominations have been shrinking for decades and even the evangelical churches have stopped growing. Some even ask if there's a future for organized religion in America.

We are also at a crossroads in Unitarian Universalism. As UUA President Peter Morales has noted, Unitarian Universalists are an ever shrinking percentage of the US population. Yet he also says we are uniquely positioned to appeal to an America seeking spiritual connection without the accompanying dogma.

Morales has offered a three-part formula for future UU success: to get religion, grow leaders, and cross boundaries. In my experience, I have found that small group ministries, and especially covenant groups, are a remarkably effective way to intentionally connect President Morales' vision with the mission of growing our denomination.

By "get religion," Morales means UUs should claim our religious experience and find ways to articulate it.

To give this context, recall that we ask our young teens to do this in Coming of Age every year. Certainly, we adults should be as willing as our youth to discuss our beliefs with authenticity, without expecting ourselves to have all the answers. Covenant groups are an excellent forum for this exploration, since one of the three major parts of the covenant group process is to share our beliefs and to talk about that which moves us and in which we have faith.

Morales' second recommendation is that we find ways to grow more leaders, and that this will encourage congregational growth. Covenant groups provide a great opportunity to identify, select, train and often install new people into the congregation's lay ministerial leadership. In this way, these small groups help leaders learn to trust their gifts. In turn, members begin to trust and respect their new leaders.

What's more, covenant group leaders are specifically charged with identifying and developing new leadership from within their group, to make sure that, as the group grows and divides, new leaders will emerge who are ready to guide the group. So we are intentionally identifying and cultivating lay leadership within our congregations through these programs, including everyone from committee chairs to board members.

Crossing boundaries is Pres. Morales's third recommendation – that we reach beyond our comfort zone and gently enter each other's lives. In the process, we can get to know people of all ages, colors, and economic backgrounds.

This is an important part of all small group ministries. In these groups we join together and connect with one another on a personal level. There are many opportunities for personal sharing in an atmosphere of attentiveness and respect.

In recent years, Unitarian Universalists have begun to shine our light with advertising campaigns, with our social witness and by just talking with friends and colleagues about where we go on Sunday mornings. Through these activities and by participating in small group ministries in their various forms we can become, as Peter Morales says, the religion for our time.

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