

Ministerial Search Committee as Covenant Group

*By Ted Lau, Chair, Ministerial Search Committee,
Eliot Unitarian Chapel, Kirkwood, Missouri*

Our liberal religious movement is empowered by covenantal promises, from the largest scale (agreements among our congregations) to the smallest (agreements among small group members). In covenant groups of 8-12 people, much of the work of the church is accomplished: lay pastoral care, fellowship and friendship building, and searching for and sharing discovered meaning among people who subscribe to different worldviews. As Rev. Thandeka puts it: covenant groups realize “love beyond belief”.

After a two-year search for a new settled lead minister, the seven members of the Eliot Unitarian Chapel Ministerial Search Committee (MSC) found ourselves transformed by love beyond belief, changed in the ways small group ministry can change people. We found ourselves more intimately related, more trusting, and more open-hearted and open-minded, with a great sense of accomplishment and of meaningful service together.

We came out of this process understanding our different beliefs, temperaments and ways of working, and very much liking each other in our differences. In reflecting on our being together, I have come to ask in what ways the MSC was the same as, and different from, other small covenantal groups in which many of us have participated.

An obvious, but not very interesting, reason for our transformation might be that we worked intensively together for two years, meeting at least twice per month for two hours. I'd like to highlight some other aspects of our MSC that made such a difference: making covenantal promises, making consequential decisions, celebrating the unlikely with gratitude, and acting as the church.

Our Charter: Goal, Covenant, and Ground Rules

Consistent with what I've done as a small group facilitator, I drafted a charter and brought it to the group for revision and adoption. The heart of the charter is the covenant statement itself: “We pledge to the congregation to nominate as candidate for Settled Minister the qualified person we believe is the best fit to lead Eliot Unitarian Chapel for the next decade and beyond.” Ours may be more elaborate than most small group covenants because we needed to make promises not only to each other, but to our congregation and to ministers in search as well. Therefore, our covenant included maintaining the trust, confidentiality, and integrity of the search process; soliciting input from the congregation; seeking guidance but using our own judgment; speaking publicly as one voice; maintaining right relationships; and caring for one another.

We spoke aloud our covenant for a few meetings, making improvements, then adopted it, each member assenting to its stipulations. We revisited our covenant at key milestones during the search process, especially before meetings when consensus decision-making was expected and stakes were high.

Our Ground Rules for meetings called us to test our assumptions, share relevant information and opinions, reach a shared understanding of important words, explain our reasoning and intent, combine inquiry with advocacy, name all significant issues, and be as succinct as possible.

Although our ground rules were oriented toward effective decision-making, they also contain core techniques for helping persons in groups actively listen and speak their truth. We implemented the

“participant - observer” technique to provide valuable feedback when our meeting effectiveness fell short of the mark.

A Blessing

Since all significant endeavors deserve to be blessed when they begin, I spoke a blessing to our MSC that acknowledged our hopes and fears, spoke of the importance of the quality of our relationships, urged us to rely on non-rational as well as rational processes, and invoked the spirit of our ancestors. It could be used for the first session of a new covenant group, or renewal of an existing group. (http://www.smallgroupministry.net/members/A_Blessing_for_Covenant_Groups_TLau.doc)

Making Consequential Decisions

Small groups have more impact on their members when they are accountable for something consequential. Consequential decisions invite everyone to participate, share their values and priorities, and grapple with differences. Service project choices are a good example. A dissenter must decide whether to block the majority on principle or to compromise in favor of the option. We don't want to turn reflection circles into task-oriented work committees, but there is nothing like a passionate discussion around a consequential decision to accelerate the process of building trust, deepen intimacy and realize love beyond belief. In those circumstances you feel the strengthening fire of transformation.

To achieve our ministry vision, the MSC had to address a broad range of topics in our religious life: the importance of theology, the balance of intellectual vs. spiritual in sermons, the nature of Unitarian Universalism, and shared ministry between laity and clergy. Small groups can take on service projects that similarly engage important areas of religious life. For a social justice project, you would engage questions of how UU values relate to social policy or political issues. Similarly, writing a consensus description of Unitarian Universalism for a local interfaith journal would engage questions of cultural identity and pluralism in religious truth.

Be bold in envisioning a service project! A set of bold alternative projects is more challenging for decisionmaking, which means it is better for eliciting members' values and priorities and for forcing reconciliation to an acceptable decision. You learn about each other's risk tolerance, as well as each member's set point between hope and fear, optimism and pessimism.

After decision-making and action comes reflection. A reflective question often used in small groups begins: “Speak of a time when” While asking members to relate important events from their past may be the customary way to build trust, after two years I know very little about the previous lives of the other six members of the MSC. Better to reflect on significant decisions you've made and actions you've taken together. Then your reflective question becomes: “What moved or surprised you about the project we did together last month?” Shared action allows the emergence of diverse perspectives about the same event.

Celebrating the Unlikely with Gratitude

Several times during our MSC's two year journey we doubted the likelihood of success. Many factors were out of our control and seemed to work against us. Yet we had to persist in believing in the hope of success, however unlikely, in order to do the work and hold to our promise to the congregation.

The situation with small group ministry is much the same. There is no guarantee of success, yet you follow the process and sometimes unlikely, transformative things happen: a normally reticent man shares a deep feeling and receives acceptance and empathy; a member appears at the meeting caught up in a life crisis, the prepared session is abandoned, and a moving example of pastoral care happens. The

list of unlikely happenings is unlimited.

I recommend that your group leader/facilitator keep a journal of things that happen during meetings that surprise or move them. This record can be used later to celebrate the unlikely. (I wish I had kept such a record of the “little miracles” that happened in the MSC.) Whether at a meeting to decide to continue as a group, or to answer a question for the year-end report (How did your material will be close at hand. By feeding back these kinds of occurrences to the group, members become aware of the types of transformations that participation brings, and of the progress, however unlikely, the group is making towards its goals.

If following the detailed steps of the search process will not guarantee finding a minister who helps us fulfill our vision, or if following the guidelines for facilitating a safe small group will not guarantee that members are transformed, to what or to whom are we thankful for the unlikely events that occur? Being a small group or search committee in a religious institution makes available to us a heritage of religious thought and language for expressing our gratitude. Occasionally speaking a simple prayer to acknowledge the gifts received from the Spirit of Life is a recommended practice.

Acting as the Church

During meetings and service projects, members of small groups act as the church. We actualize the vision of our liberal religion to care for one another, to trust each other with our sacred stories, to share emotions as well as ideas, to wrestle with making meaning of our experiences (both joys and sufferings), and to hear and accept how others frame their lives in terms of ultimate things (death, purpose, morality, forgiveness, atonement). Through democratic process and consensus decision-making, we act and serve as a unity, as a microcosm of an ideal religious institution. Our Ministerial Search Committee acted as the church in search of a new religious leader; your small group acts as the church in anchoring the religious life to intimate and ultimate conversations and to service to others.

Small groups can also advance other goals the church has set, such as increasing socioeconomic and racial diversity, fostering multi-generational conversation, or improving hospitality toward visitors and newcomers. Our search committee was a “closed” group and could not act on these goals through our membership. However, we held a vision of our church as more diverse, integrated and welcoming throughout our search process.

Beyond alignment to mission, vision, and values, there is a paradoxical way in which each small covenantal group *is identical* to the larger church. Two diverse sources hint at this metaphorical identity:

- A small group *is identical* to the church in the way Black Elk came to understand that the center of the sacred hoop of his people was not located only at a specific place between four mountains on the Northern Plains, but was located “everywhere.”
- A small group *is identical* to the church in the way that each point in a hologram represents all objects in the photographed scene, albeit each from a slightly different perspective.

When lighting the candle at the beginning of each session of the Ministerial Search Committee, we were re-enacting the lighting of the chalice in the sanctuary on Sunday morning; while not the same chalice, certainly the same light.

Postscript: On April 25, 2013, after a two year search process, the congregation of Eliot Unitarian Chapel voted to call Reverend Barbara Gadon to be our settled lead minister.

-Taken from the Small Group Ministry Network Journal, Fall 2013