

## The Impact of Small Group Ministry on Ministry

*This fall we asked, “How does small group ministry influence your ministry?” and “What are your successes, challenges, and questions with or about covenant groups?” In this issue, we hear from Rev. Jeff Jones and Rev. Dr. Margret O’Neill. Additional responses will be published in subsequent issues of the **SGM Journal**. Ministers are invited to send comments to [journaleditor@smallgroupministry.net](mailto:journaleditor@smallgroupministry.net) for inclusion in the Spring/Summer Journal.*

“Small Group Ministry is a beautiful example of shared ministry. Through small groups, the facilitators and the members of the groups share in the ministry of the congregation. The facilitators share in leadership and both facilitators and group members share in ministry to one another. It is a wonderful complement to the ministry offered by the minister.

Small Group Ministry in particular focuses on two areas of the life of the congregation. Members of small groups care for one another, and so are integral to the sense of community and pastoral outreach of a congregation. Just as important, small groups provide a safe place for spiritual deepening and transformation, and I continue to see this as one of, if not the primary reason for our gathering as a congregation.

The successes are the very capable and gifted facilitators who form the backbone of the program. And equally important is a Steering Committee that nurtures and reinforces the Small Group Ministry Program.

The challenges are the need to keep all groups healthy and thriving. Sometimes group drift and sometimes groups struggle for a variety of reasons. Another challenge is making sure we have healthy departures when members leave groups.”

*~ Rev. Jeff Jones, Minister, Emerson Unitarian Universalist Congregation, Marietta, Georgia*

“I believe small group ministry is a key element of healthy congregational life, in a church of any size. The spiritual practices of thoughtful reflection and deep listening create a healthy relational quality which, if integrated into all aspects of congregational life, can heal and transform the covenantal life of a congregation. Time and again I have heard small group ministry participants comment, ‘If everyone had the experience of a group process like this, it would make every part of the church organization work so much better!’

It is a pleasure to observe the successful development of individual skills and group coherence as a program develops. In my experience, one of the challenges in building a program with a significant extent of congregational participation is the reluctance that many people have to try something new, to risk connection and self-disclosure, in a process that somehow seems to them to be mysterious or arcane. On the opposite end of the spectrum, but perhaps reflecting that same reluctance, is the difficulty in convincing a group, once it has formed, to end and re-form with a different mix of participants, or to divide in order to seed two new groups. Once the relational trust has been developed, people voice the concern that they could never experience that level of connection with any other group of eight to ten people.

My experience tells me that small group ministry might be most effective as an intentional program of

the church, in which groups are explicitly time-limited and people come to understand that the relational depth they experience in this spiritual practice is not limited to any particular or unique group of fellow congregants. I am confident that could work, but it is difficult to change to that model once groups have formed on an open-ended basis with no built-in expectation of termination or division for program expansion.”

*~ Rev. Dr. Margret A. O'Neill, Interim Minister  
Accredited Interim Minister; Professional Transition Specialist  
Unitarian Universalist Church of Buffalo, New York*

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