

Theme-Based Ministry and Small Group Ministry

Theme-based ministry (TBM) is multi-generational worship and activities that focus on a monthly theme. Many Unitarian Universalist congregations have expanded TBM into small group ministry and provide theme-related discussion guides to enrich the covenant group experience. In this issue, we share theme-based ministry designs contributed by several Small Group Ministry leaders.

Theme-Based Connection Circles in Wilmington, Delaware

Our church is in its fifth year of worship themes, and just last year we expanded the themes to include our small group ministry program, which we call Connection Circles. Our themes encompass the regular church year, running from September through May, and our “generalthemed” Circles line up with the themes for their sessions each month. This year our themes include Courage, Faith, Brokenness, Joy, Empowerment, Generosity, Peace, Confession, and Grace. The assistant minister creates three sessions each month based on the monthly theme. The facilitators are able to choose which of the sessions their groups will work with. The only complaint we’ve gotten so far is that they like all the sessions and have trouble choosing!

The positive feedback is that folks like the opportunity to go deeper with the themes and consider different perspectives on each of them. It is sometimes a challenge to encourage our groups to embrace the more difficult themes. “Brokenness” for example, or last year’s theme of “Evil.” Groups tend to shy away from those themes and instead want something more comfortable. But groups who have embraced the more difficult themes report that those were some of their best sessions. One of our favorite successes is that other groups within the congregation have asked for copies of the sessions so that they, too, can work with the monthly themes in small group meetings.

~ Rev. Michelle Collins, Assistant Minister, First Unitarian Church of Wilmington, DE

Theme-Based Community Circles in Minneapolis, Minnesota

In keeping with the small group ministry model, Community Circles at First Universalist Church of Minneapolis are groups of 8-10 committed participants who come together with a trained leader to listen and share about their lives. These groups are grounded in the spiritual practices of deep listening and open-hearted reflection. Our Community Circles meet every other week, either for six sessions in the fall or the spring, or for an entire year. Some groups are open to everyone; others are for people who have a particular identity or season of life in common, such as Young Adults or People of Color.

Worship at First Universalist is organized around monthly themes. This fall's themes include Digging In, No Going Back, and Prayer. The themes inform the session plans of our 24 Community Circles. During the week before the sermon, the Minister of Membership and Adult Ministries creates a session plan from readings, the sermon draft, and song lyrics provided by our worship leaders. Each session leaves room for people to bring their own stories, cares, and joys into the circle.

After the sermon is preached on Sunday, the session plan is revised to align with the service, then emailed to the facilitators to use the following week. All gatherings take place at the church building. When facilitators arrive to lead their session, they encounter five boxes filled with all the tools they will need: a chalice, matches, session plan, and altar cloth.

This congregation has had theme-based small group ministry for several years. The response has been positive, because it's an opportunity to engage in the greater conversations in the life of the church.

~ Rev. Elaine Tenbrink, Minister of Membership and Adult Ministries, First Universalist Church of Minneapolis, MN

Theme-Based Chalice Circles in Charlotte, North Carolina

At the Piedmont Unitarian Universalist Church we have found small group ministry combined with theme-based ministry helps our congregation connect and go deeper spiritually. Our themes run in a three-year cycle and were originally created by the Religious Services Council, the ministers, and the Chalice Circle Coordinator. Our themes are Sunday worship topics at least once a month, as well as the topic of our newsletter articles and Chalice Circle sessions. Sometimes our other committees and councils will also take up a monthly theme. For example, our Social Justice Council recently used the theme of Hope to partner with an organization bringing hope to the children of Sudan by building and staffing schools.

Each year we review the upcoming themes at our Chalice Circle Facilitator's June meeting. We make small changes to the themes before the upcoming year. The minister writes the first draft of the session. It then goes to the Facilitator's Meeting where they actually hold the session and then make revisions after reviewing it. Theme-based ministry combined with small group ministry just makes sense. Our chalice circle members report that they now feel a deeper engagement with the congregation. They are excited for the Sunday service on the monthly theme and discover new ways of thinking about important spiritual topics. In addition, by gathering in small groups to discuss personal experiences of grace, hope, love, and loss they find personal connections that strengthen their own spiritual journey. The themes add depth to our sessions and the small groups enrich our worship!

~ Rev. Robin Tanner, Minister, Piedmont Unitarian Universalist Church, Charlotte, NC

Theme-Based Small Groups in Augusta, Maine

At the Unitarian Universalist Community Church our love affair with small group ministry continues. From the beginning, our intention was to offer ministry to one another and provide opportunities for spiritual growth through the art of listening and responding to each other. We believe that wide-spread participation in SGM has significantly improved our ability to manage the challenges of congregational life.

This year our congregation is experimenting with themebased ministry. Each month Sunday worship, Religious Exploration and Small Group Ministry provide opportunities to explore the same theme. Our minister, RE Director, and Small Group Ministry Coordinator work together to provide materials and opportunities for people to engage the theme. Our intention is to create a community where we have something in common to discuss over time so we can build connections and deepen our spiritual practice.

The theme for each month is introduced through a packet called "Soul Matters." It is compiled by our minister, Rev. Carie Johnsen, from material contributed by interested members of the congregation. The packet includes poems and short readings, a book list, recommended movies and songs, YouTube clips and original writings, a number of questions for contemplation or discussion, and suggestions for experiential practices to deepen one's exploration. (Learn more at <http://www.augustauu.org/staff-ministries-andreligious-exploration/ministries/theme-based-ministry/>)

As soon as the month's packet is available, the SGM Coordinator provides it to the group leaders. Leaders have an outline that helps them choose material from the packet to guide their group discussions. We encourage leaders to make their outlines available on our website so others can connect with the themes and benefit from using the sessions.

As part of theme-based ministry, we offer an open group once a month for those not currently connected with a group. Anyone interested is welcome to participate in a session created from the "Soul Matters" packet and facilitated by the SGM Coordinator. The open group provides an opportunity to get to know new people, experience small group ministry, and make deeper connections than would happen at coffee hour. Our hope is that some participants will be enticed to join one of our ongoing groups.

We anticipate that our long standing embrace of SGM will support us in this experiment with theme-based ministry and that, in turn, theme-based ministry will enrich small group ministry with creativity and even more opportunities to deepen spiritual growth and interpersonal connection at UUCC.

~ Kathy Kellison, Small Group Ministry Coordinator, Unitarian Universalist Community Church, Augusta, ME

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