

Changing Culture Through Small Group Ministry

By Mary Alice Smith, Channing Memorial Church, Newport , RI

First, some history. Channing Memorial Church in Newport, RI, explored the idea of small group ministry shortly after the Rev. Amy Bowden Freedman arrived as our full-time settled minister in 2000. Previously, Channing had been in decline, losing members and with low attendance at worship services. Within a year after Rev. Freedman's arrival, the church was flourishing. Attendance at services was averaging one hundred people. We were glad to see so many newcomers, but we were worried that as we grew, we would lose the familiarity and closeness we had enjoyed as a small congregation.

These were also difficult and divisive times for us in a community with a large military presence as our congregation dealt with 9/11 and our nation at war. We had some contentious meetings. A Small Group Ministry program offered a means for Channing to retain the feeling of connection and ease at being among friends, while discussing complex issues in a safe environment.

We began our small groups in 2003 with seven groups meeting in homes or at church, engaged in what we hoped would become a meaningful addition to church life. Now, some dozen years later, our program is still going strong with 36 or so participating each session, thanks in no small part to the leadership of Bill Peresta, our Small Group Coordinator.

I believe small group ministry has made profound changes in congregational life at Channing. We've learned valuable new interpersonal and leadership skills from being in small groups that we carry over to committee and other settings. First and foremost, we've learned respectful listening. While someone else has the floor, rather than interrupting or planning what we're going to say next, we really pay attention. We try to understand when someone expresses their thoughts or a differing point of view, recognizing they may have valuable perspectives to share.

Most chairpersons now begin committee meetings with a chalice lighting and check-in. This sets a tenor for meetings that reminds us we are part of a spiritual community. Leaders go around the table, inviting each person to speak. This draws out every person, even shy and soft-spoken introverts. Everyone feels they matter and have something valuable to contribute. We have much less conflict at meetings now, as people feel truly heard and also feel safe expressing differing points of view.

Since every first session of a small group is spent writing a covenant, we've become accustomed to setting out our expectations of one another and what the rules will be for our gatherings. Each group figures out: How confidential will discussions be? What commitment will we make to attendance and being on time?

People in our small groups have two hours to discuss a topic in a relaxed, pleasant atmosphere where they can share their personal experiences. By exploring our own life's journey, we get to know one another in a more expansive and deeper way than is usually available to us.

This dynamic fills emotional needs while fostering understanding, and means that people who've participated in small groups now have several friends in the congregation that they know particularly well. To keep the groups fresh, we mix the pot twice a year when new sessions begin, assigning people based on their scheduled availability.

Small groups are an especially welcoming place for newcomers, who can get to know several people from the congregation in a safe and secure setting much more quickly than they ever could in a year of coffee hours. Each of our small groups completes a service project at the end of a session, which also connects people to the larger community and helps participants become aware of different aspects of congregational life.