

## **Small Group Ministry in a Community of Seniors**

*By Rev. Michelle Collins, First Unitarian Church of Wilmington, DE*

For the past two years, I've been leading a small group at a local continuing care retirement community. Over this time, it's turned into a vibrant group that kept meeting even when they told me they wanted a break for the summer. I think small groups meeting in retirement communities have incredible potential, as places for spiritual growth, as places for caring connections, as places for outreach, and as places for folks to engage with Unitarian Universalism especially when they may not be able to get to church as much anymore. We've not been without our challenges though.

**Challenge #1: Having an on-site coordinator.** Without a member of the community providing both initial and ongoing support, I've found it's difficult to have a group going. In the case of this group, we had a church member who lives in the community and takes care of scheduling the group, sending out reminder notices, and checking in with folks between meetings. We also have the support of a staff member, their pastoral ministries coordinator. I learned how crucial this is when I tried to start up a group at another local community and wasn't able to get it off the ground because I was missing this role for the group.

**Challenge #2: What to call the group.** In the beginning, we discarded a number of names. Connection Circle – that's what we call them at our church – nope. Too confusing. Small group ministry – nope. Too specific, and they didn't want it to have the 'm' word. It's going on the general community calendar, after all. We settled on "Unitarian Universalist Discussion Group." It names who we are, and the residents reasoned that it was more welcoming to new people who might like to try us out. And we've had a variety of folks check us out, too. And a few even came back!

**Challenge #3: What to talk about.** We thought we had everything set, and we all showed up for our first meeting. And then THE QUESTION: "So, what are we going to talk about?" At first I suggested we could work with our monthly themed small group sessions the groups at the church were using. The group didn't want that, for sure. "Let's just try something," was my response. I changed the title on the page, and we did a session on wonder, our current monthly theme. And everyone loved it! "Let's do something just like this next time, too," they said.

Over time, we've tried a number of things. We did some sessions on James Luther Adams theology and five smooth stones. We've tried sessions on some of the monthly themes. Over the summer, the group met without me and discussed sermons. For one session, participants told me they wanted something about what spirituality meant, but didn't really want to talk about spirituality in terms of their spirituality. I brought a session about milestones on our spiritual journeys, folks talked about their spirituality, and it was declared the best session we'd had so far.

In fact, several sessions have been named the best session we've had so far. More than just a group, I've seen a community forming. Folks in the group are consistently getting together outside of the group because of their identity as members of the group and the connections they've made during our time together. They're asking what the upcoming monthly themes are so they can think about them ahead of time. When someone new attends, the other group members have invited them to other activities and helped them to get connected. It's a community, and a consistent one.

I still haven't figured out what the group is as far as a category. Is it a discussion group, spiritual growth and engagement, pastoral care, a connection to their heritage and religion, a safe place to talk

religion and politics (topics that are universally avoided in the community's dining room), or is it something else? I think it's all of these. One growing trajectory in the small groups movement is groups that are outside the walls of our congregations but are connected with one of our congregations. Retirement and continuing care communities are ideal settings for these groups, and the group members (as well as the group leader) end up reaping many benefits. In some ways, I've found it to be one of the best implementations of small group ministry. I hope that you might consider trying one out in your community, too.