

History and Evolution Of Small Group Ministry

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Hopes and Dreams

Small Group Ministry has offered much to UU's in the first 15 years.

What do you hope it will offer in the next 10 years?

Please send your hopes and dreams for your SGM/Covenant Groups to journalteam@smallgroupministry.net

When did Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry “start”? Although Rev. John Morgan suggests that it was part of the Pietist reform in 1675, started by a Lutheran minister and spinning off reforms in other denominations, let us establish the current Small Group Ministry/ Covenant Groups, based largely on the work of evangelist Carl George, as “starting” with the emergence of *Covenant Group News* in late 1998 by Rev. Bob Hill. The second part of the “start” occurred with the organization of the UU Small Group Ministry Network at General Assembly 2004. This began the organized tracking of Small Group Ministry/Covenant Group events and resources. Several evolutions are evident since the “start”.

Making Small Group Ministry Unitarian Universalist The First Evolution started with concern about the lack of numeric congregational growth. Rev. Bob Hill, Executive Director of the Southwest District, and Rev. Glenn Turner, of the Northeast District (namely Maine), started looking at this growth issue. What draws people to a congregation, and what keeps them connected? Both Bob and Glenn were aware of a statement made about 1980 by James Luther Adams, a prominent Unitarian Universalist minister, that people come looking for *Intimacy* and *Ultimacy*.

Add to the desire for growth and the focus on the relational, the work of Carl George (an evangelical Christian leader) focused on the Meta-Church, or the church in transition. The Meta-Church movement focused on groups of 10 people within congregations or congregations made up of small groups, hence the title of Bob Hill's book, *The Complete Guide to Small Group Ministry: Saving the World, Ten at a Time*. While several Unitarian Universalist congregations were using small groups in various ways, it was the focus on growth and relationships grounded in Intimacy and Ultimacy, and the use of small groups, that created Covenant Groups (Bob Hill's term) and the Small Group Ministry (Glenn Turner's term) movement.

This First Evolution transformed the theories and methodologies developed by others into a model that was accessible for Unitarian Universalists with our own literature, our own terminology. The intimacy is part of the use of small groups within various faith traditions; the uniqueness of Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry may be the ultimacy or the search for meaning that is grounded in our varied life and spiritual journeys, rather than creeds.

From the Small Group to the Congregation *The Second Evolution* moves from the person and the single group to the broader congregation. Participants in small group ministry learn a different way of being with each other, through listening, sharing, and being present. *Small group ministry, done well in the respective groups, changes how people interact beyond the group itself.* How you minister to each other--and yourselves--matters.

Increased listening to others and sharing our own thought from the heart as our own, without needing to defend, argue or persuade, brought a gentleness in communication at general congregational meetings.

I witnessed this in the congregation that I attend. We had learned to listen in small groups, and our larger meetings, even considering hard issues, were transformed.

What we do in the Small Group Ministry/Covenant Group sessions matters.

How we implement Small Group Ministry as part of overall congregational life matters.

And as more people become involved with Small Group Ministry, there is an impact on Unitarian Universalism overall.

All because Small Group Ministry expands beyond the individual group!

Small Group Ministry for Everyone *The Third Evolution* is expectation and entitlement. People are increasingly coming to our congregations looking for Small Group Ministry. People go to websites looking for Small Group or Covenant Group Ministry. Or they find the description that invites connections. Visibility! Expectations!

Michael Durall, who works with churches in various denominations, notes that in some congregations there is the expectation that new members will participate in a specific number of sessions, with an invitation to join ongoing groups. UU congregations vary in expectation of participation, but resources are increasingly available for all ages: younger children and youth, young adults, adults, and at the other end of the continuum, for later life and elders. Also the possibility of having groups of mixed ages - youth and adults together, family groups, and groups for parents.

Let's make Small Group Ministry a *viable option* for everyone connected with our congregations as members or friends!

Trends: Broader and Deeper I see two trends emerging that enhance the very essence of Small Group Ministry/ Covenant Groups. The first is Bringing Small Group Ministry Out Into the World, as advocated by Rev. Dr. M'ellen Kennedy, and a focus for the Network. We have come full circle from Small Group Ministry as an evangelical agent to a UU vehicle to enhance congregational growth and depth, and are now offering it as UU outreach beyond congregational walls. Please see the brochure on the SGM Network website. *We are broadening the work of congregations and the impact of UUism.*

The second trend is a grouping or series of session plans on a topic. There are times when a single session plan on a topic is so rich that there is a decision to extend the plan to a second session. However, the time between the sessions is a deterrent to smooth transition into the second session. A series of sessions provides beginnings and endings to various aspects of a topic for an ongoing group. Short series, separate from a small group, may also be an entry for people to experience small group ministry, leading to more involvement long-term. This is a way of deepening the involvement with a topic. Maybe this is related to including Small Group Ministry as part of a trend toward Theme-Based Ministry. *As we take more time with topics, we are able to engage more deeply –the ultimacy.*

References:

Network publications:

Ten Years of Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry.

Small Group Ministry With All Ages

Excerpts from CGN, October 2011, November 2011, February 2012. *Journal Spring 2015*

“Small Group Ministry: Rooted in Universalism”, Rev. John Morgan, *Covenant Group News (CGN)* February 29, 2000

"Small Group Ministry: A Requirement for Church Membership, Michael Dural *Small Group Ministry Quarterly, Fall 2010*

A more in depth version of this article may be found on the online resource directory of the SGM Network Website, www.smallgroupministry.net

“The most basic and powerful way to connect to another person is to listen. Just listen. Perhaps the most important thing we ever give each other is our attention. . . . A loving silence often has far more power to heal and to connect than the most well-intentioned words. ”

— Rachel Naomi Remen

-Taken from the Small Group Ministry Network Journal, Fall 2015