

## **Small Group Ministry: The Critical Role of the Minister**

*By Rev. Helen Zidowecki, UU SGM Network Board*

Small Group Ministry and Covenant Groups were envisioned, planned, described by ministers. Ten Years of Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry, published by the UU Small Group Ministry Network in 2009, contains about fifty articles, of which 75% were written by or with input of a minister. This presents the critical role of the minister in changing the dynamics of a congregation, and working into a pattern of shared ministry.

I was part of the development in the Northeast District, where Rev. Glenn Turner led the ministers in the district in a yearlong study of the work of Rev. Carl George, an evangelical consultant around the Meta-Church. This was followed by workshops for congregations in the district. There was an excitement because congregations were learning this together, and there was support for ministers as this was destined to change their ministry.

**The Role of the Minister** within SGM itself has evolved over the years, as noted in “Sharing the Ministry Through SGM” by Rev. Melissa Carvill-Ziemer, Quarterly, 2009 Winter. “When we began, I had a significant coordinating role as the minister and I was intimately involved in every step of creation and execution. As our program has grown, we have been fortunate to have a skilled and committed lay leader step forward and assume the coordinating role. She has availed herself of opportunities to receive in-depth training on Small Group Ministry practices and has applied her learning and organizational skills to strengthen our own program. As the minister, I remain actively involved in SGM by attending facilitators and Steering Committee meetings, writing and reviewing sessions, and inviting new participants into our groups. I no longer, however, hold the bulk of the responsibility for making SGM happen in our congregation. We make SGM happen together and in this way we all have the satisfaction that comes when ministry is truly shared.” *Rev. Melissa Carvill-Ziemer, then Minister of the UU Church of Kent, Ohio*

In discussion with numerous congregations and ministers involved in SGM, the role of the Minister is outlined in Implementing Small Group Ministry. “The minister is key in whether and how a SGM program works. Visible support and active involvement of the minister is a factor in success. The role of the minister varies in implementation and stage of the program and the size of the congregation. *SGM is a program of the congregation rather than a program of the minister. However, if the minister is not involved and not supportive, the program probably will not succeed.*”

Major functions of the parish minister include:

- Encourages groups to provide ministry to each other. Includes support to groups and referral to Pastoral Care
- Advocates for the program: provides resources, possibly including session plans, includes Small Group Ministry in messages from the pulpit, is a resource for all areas of Small Group Ministry.
- Shared ministry: encourages shared ministry and may take more of a support rather than administrative role. Assists with selection and development of leadership, including modeling ministry, is available to the lay leadership for group and faith development. Works with a designated lay leader who assumes the coordinating function. *To the degree possible, the structure of SGM is in the hands of laity, especially the facilitation of the Small Group Ministry groups.*

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**Extending the Spiritual focus of Minister:** sharing the thoughts and inspiration is an integral part of

ministry. Now add to the standard format of sermons, reflections and inspirational services a new form with the creation of groups: session plans.

Small Group Ministry invited leaders and participants into a part of ministry sacred to ministers: spiritual connections and practices. *It called us to place spiritual exploration squarely into the realm of personal interactions, of asking people to engage more from the heart than from the head.* We were doing this in a setting that started by recognizing personal lives that were important enough to warrant time to share as an initial part of the time together. We then needed to look at how we present inspirational material, how we frame the reflections to open out into open-ended responses, not ‘yes’ or ‘no’ or a pre-conceived response. The shared ministry, then, takes us beyond just what we do to support or have the program, to engaging both the congregants and ourselves on a different level. It is almost a joke in my home congregation: when I want to explore a thought or a problem, I resort to writing a Small Group Ministry session. Writing for both myself and other to use presents new ways of viewing a topic, and new options. There are many session plans available, both from ministers and from laity. It is delightful to receive session plans submitted for inclusion on the UU SGM Network. There are over 800 sessions listed in the Session Plan Directory on the website. I am truly humbled by the submissions from all over, for two significant reasons: this is a way for ministers to share spiritual reflections in a way that is less formal than a sermon, that engages with topics of life. Ministers are increasingly sharing session plans they have created – and are still creating – over the years. This becomes a living legacy and gives congregants a different way to get to know the minister.

Lay people are creating session plans, individually, or in conjunction with ministers and others in their SGM environment. This increases their role in the spiritual fabric of the congregation. The ministerial legacy, then, is the enhancement of spiritual journeys throughout the congregation.

I had a delightful experience meeting with a small group that was dealing with some relational issues, using the methodology of creating a session plan that considers how we are with one another in a setting, and why. The plan was for the group to critique and ‘field test’ the session plan. It not only brought exploration of the specific concerns, but gave me new insights into facets of the topic. We did this also for a second plan, with such rich contributions. I have suggested to the SGM Committee that other groups in the program engage with this process throughout the year as a new level of connection among groups. We create not only from our own spiritual place, but also so that others can engage. A number of ministers create session plans as collaboration between clergy and laity – another facet of shared ministry.

### **Holding the Vision of Small Group Ministry**

There needs to be a ‘vision-holder’ for SGM, as described in “Holding the Vision of Small Group Ministry” by Peter Freedman Bowden, UU PLANET Ministry & Media, *UU Small Group Ministry Network, Quarterly, Fall 2006.*

“We’ve reached a point in our Association’s small group ministry movement where a large number of congregations have been working with this ministry for years. What happens when our congregations are confronted with the amount of work and care that small group ministry requires? There is a great deal of work related to small group ministry that can be delegated and shared. It is healthy and appropriate for this to happen. But we must be careful when it comes to vision. Most congregations that launch small group ministries have their minister as the primary vision caster during this process. The minister’s support of this ministry is perhaps the greatest indicator of its initial success. I think most lay leaders and ministers understand this. Yes, we

need the minister to help us sell this to the congregation. Yes, we need the minister to give this airtime from the pulpit. The truth is that the need for holding up the vision never goes away. Small group ministry needs the primary vision caster to continually promote the role of small groups and shared ministry in congregational life. Once the communication fails at the public level, in worship, in newsletter articles, and so on, the entire small group ministry program starts to suffer. This ministry can't thrive as a behind-the-scenes or invisible ministry. *It takes a strong lay leader or other staff person to uphold the vision for this ministry when the primary vision caster(s) has stopped broadcasting.*"

Diana Dorroh explains working with Rev. Steve Crump to develop the type of leadership and clergy/laity implied by Peter Bowden ("Supporting the Vision Caster," Diana Dorroh, Baton Rouge, LA, *SGM Network Quarterly Winter 2007*)

"It's practically an obsession of mine that the leaders need to hear our minister's vision of SGM and that they need to hear it often, because it is ministry and it is important. The leaders need support and inspiration from the congregation's spiritual leader. This means scheduling the leaders meetings when he can attend and rescheduling when necessary. Steve always does a wonderful job, but he doesn't have to plan the leaders meetings or attend meetings to plan the leaders meetings, He just has to read the agenda in my emails or discuss the agenda briefly with me before the leaders meeting and then to be there.

Obviously, this partnership requires trust between the minister and coordinator and a shared vision of a thriving small group ministry program. *But if this trust can be established, it allows the professional minister of the congregation to play the vision casting role.*"

*Small Group Ministry is a program of the congregation rather than a program of the minister. However, if the minister is not involved or does not support or does not make the vision of Small Group Ministry visible, the program probably will not succeed. Conversely, holding the vision that is created jointly with the Small Group Ministry leadership enhances the ministry of the congregation many-fold. The program is vulnerable when the minister and coordinator are not carrying the vision together.*

### **Resources for Ministers/Ministry:**

There are over 40 articles specifically noted to be by and about ministry the UUSGM Network website Resource listing. Additional articles by ministers are ongoing in Covenant Group News and the SGM Journal. We are pulling resources for a minister's section of the Website for additional interaction. We want to include articles from ministers for Covenant Group News, SGM Journal, and website notations. Please contact Rev. Helen Zidowecki at [office@smallgroupministry.net](mailto:office@smallgroupministry.net)

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