

Twenty Years of “Small Groups”

By Rev. Helen Zidowecki

Twenty years ago Small Group Ministry and Covenant Groups were emerging within Unitarian Universalism and challenging how we “do church.” Individuals, congregations and Unitarian Universalism itself have grown with the process over the years. Small Group Ministry is the broad concept, and Covenant Groups, Chalice Circles, and other names are used to describe the groups themselves. We continue to expand the use of Small Group Ministry within and beyond our congregations. However, the success of the movement lies in the integrity of the groups themselves.

“Small Groups” or Ministry Groups

The Small Group Ministry group is critically important to congregation life. In groups we hone our skills in listening and being with each other, and in expanding and enhancing our own spiritual journeys. Influence expands from these learnings in a small group focused on intimacy and ministry out into the congregation as a whole.

When I speak of Small Group Ministry, I may receive the response, “We have small groups.” My reaction is to say: “That is nice. Are they *ministry* groups?”

Small groups with various functions are critical to congregational life. However, Small Group Ministry has group characteristics that set these groups apart from other “small groups”. General groups provide connection with others with a focus of the group is on an organizational function or specific interest. Small Group Ministry groups provide connection with a focus on ministry to each other and shared ministry.

Many groups tend to focus on an outcome, a plan of action, a product. There may be notes and reports. *The ‘product’ of Small Group Ministry is the increased bonding and understanding that each person takes away from a session. There may be a presumed level of expertise around the function of the group. The ‘expertise’ is in the sharing of the participants, in personal connection with a topic rather than information or knowledge.*

Facilitators at the UU Community Church, Augusta, ME, gave this description of Small Group Ministry:

- People share of themselves; and are open to the sharing of others.
- The purpose of Small Group Ministry is *ministry*- to be the church with one another; The intent is for Ministry Groups to provide ongoing ministry to its members and to provide an ongoing connection with the minister. This creates a true, church- wide ministry, that the minister him or herself could never hope to create alone;
- It’s a place to explore spiritual questions. Small Group Ministry provides members an opportunity to share our spiritual development with each other; Small Group Ministry tends to not be intellectual, as so many other groups or meetings can be. (The focus is on response from the heart.)
- Small Group Ministry represents a different level of commitment. There’s a covenant that goes with it to create a safe space in which to explore issues that are spiritual and related to meaning of our lives.

Small Group Ministry Transforms

The Small Group Ministry process transforms individuals and the congregation. Skills and practices from Small Group Ministry carry into other parts of church life, such as committees and work groups. As relationships develop through Small Group Ministry, participants have increasing understanding of the gifts of more people that can enhance the work of the church, and people work across interests.

Following are notes from the response of the Small Group Ministry Committee in Augusta, ME, when asked about the impact of Small Group Ministry on other groups within the congregation:

1 Within a few months of starting SGM, we started lighting chalices and taking time for brief check in at other committee and board meetings. We pause to remember the importance of our personal connections. Through SGM, we also learned how to share and to listen as others shared.

2

3 With the connections made through SGM, and the brief check in at other meetings, the work of committees go more smoothly and may take less time.

4

5 The concept of service to the congregation and community that is part of SGM carries over to the work of the committees and other groups as being service as well as ministry.

6

7 There is a sense of shared ministry that extends beyond the SGM groups and involves us all in differing ways.

8

9 In addition, when we know each other in a different way, we have a sense of how to expand our leadership resources. Leaders have emerged as people feel more comfortable with interactions and their own contributions. And we know more about our gifts.

A note in *The Flaming Chalice* (newsletter) from Augusta, ME (August 2007)

“Our Ministry Groups have helped us be able to talk. Our Groups have helped us learn to listen to one another, and to know that communication in a religious community is more about understanding each other and less about being right or winning. Even though not all of us are active in Ministry Groups, the change has permeated our community over time. I think one reason for this is that membership in a particular group is random, based on availability and the member's schedule more than common interest, age, length of time in our church or already having known one another. Near strangers have come together regularly and forged strong bonds, even if they do not see eye to eye. Those links have become a web as we go about the work of community.

As a long time member of the UUCC, I have noticed a significant change in the tenor of our membership meetings. Particularly as we have struggled with building issues, our recent meetings have been marked by a degree of civility that was not always present. We solve problems and raise concerns rather than argue and try to convince. It is likely that not everyone is satisfied with a particular outcome, but I sense real intention to keep everyone connected to our church. We are truly acting on the Universalist notion that we do not have to think alike to love alike. Small Group Ministry has made a clear contribution to this welcome change.” Kathy Kellison, Small Group Ministry Coordinator.

KEEPING THE STRENGTH OF SMALL GROUP MINISTRY

Groups exist in a congregation to meet many needs- committees, choir, affinity groups, special activities, theological diversity. Small Group Ministry is valuable in its own right, and it offers improved functioning to all groups within the congregation as the skills of listening and speaking from the heart spread through the community. It is not Small Group Ministry or other groups, but BOTH.

I have heard it said that “Many of our meetings within the church look like Small Group Ministry.” Or, “we use Small Group Ministry in everything we do.” This may make increase the ease with which people can enter and be part of other groups with common ways of interacting learned through Small Group Ministry. The concern is that Small Group Ministry not be ‘taken for granted’ or assumed to be such an integral part of the community that it does not continue to need tending, support, and resources, and continuing clarity.

If Small Group Ministry is the way we are “doing church” or “being with each other”, newcomers need to have opportunity to participate in Small Group Ministry sessions where learning occurs through experiencing. A number of congregations include the process or specific Small Group Ministry sessions for this group. There can be short-term groups, even around specific themes, such as the UU Principles, that will engage with the process. Using Small Group Ministry with children and youth instills the congregational way of being as they *grow* in the congregation.

Small Group Ministry cannot be “measured” in conventional ways. The number of people involved or the number of groups may vary from time to time. An additional demographic is the portion of people in the congregation who have been involved over time. The depth of connection and the improvement of communication and community building within the congregation cannot be measured, only experienced. In counting the ‘exposure’ to Small Group Ministry, include specific or short-term programs that use the Small Group Ministry process. The exposure in various areas enhances the relationship process. The part that is difficult to ‘measure’ is the impact on the participants themselves. That can be obtained by asking them, inviting testimonials, and honoring involvement.

We continue to expand the use of Small Group Ministry within and beyond our congregations. The success of the movement lies in the integrity of the groups themselves where we hone our skills in listening and being with each other, and in expanding and enhancing our own spiritual journeys. This is great testament to group leaders, the Small Group Ministry leadership, and the vision of ministry and the circle of influence.

-Taken from the Small Group Ministry Network Journal, Fall 2017