

Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network CGN excerpts

“FOCUSED” SMALL GROUP MINISTRY

CGN November 13, 2008

FROM KATHY FOLDES, UCCWC HILLSBORO, OREGON

Dear Friends:

My church is going to start several short Cov Groups centering around a particular theme (for example, Buddhism, Spirit of Life, Welcoming Congregation) next fall. We have had church year length Cov Groups for 7 years. The purpose of the shorter, limited number of sessions for these new Cov Groups is to include more people- people who are new, people who know they can't make a longer commitment, people who want to try Cov Groups, people who share a passion. We would like input from those of you who have experience with this format. Some questions that would be helpful to answer are:

- How do you explain the difference between these and a class?
- Between these and a discussion or book group?
- Between these and an interest group such as a knitting group, a Circle Supper or a fellowship small group?
- How have these gone for you?
- Have they led to more involvement in longer term Cov Groups?
- Have they led to more involvement by new people in the church in other activities?
- Tips and traps?

Thanks so much,

Kathy Foldes, UCCWC Hillsboro, Oregon

RESPONSE FROM ALICIA HAWKINS, COVENANT GROUP COORDINATOR, FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF ALBUQUERQUE

Hi Kathy,

Our covenant group program is in its 5th year. The 2nd year we focused six meetings around the six Sources. Our minister, Christine Robinson, gave a series of sermons on the Sources to coordinate with our meetings. It was powerful for all concerned. Our program lasts for six months so we added a few other topics to fill out our 12 sessions. I could see a shorter series, such as you are suggesting, based just on the Sources working very well.

On the other hand several groups have come to us asking for covenant groups based on a particular interest (ecology, knitting, social action and RE teachers exploring the yearly curriculum). We told them that we'd help plan their meetings to include some facets of the covenant group process (deep listening, no cross talk, appreciative listening), but we wouldn't call that a covenant group. We talked with them about the difference in purposes in four kinds of groups. The ecology group and the knitters are an affinity group - they are drawn by a common interest. The RE teachers are a teaching group. Their goal is educational, oriented around learning about something. The social action group is an advocacy group; it has an activism piece based around an issue. The ecology might fit here also.

Covenant groups are relational groups. The focus here is on sharing and creating deep bonds. The group explores the spiritual/life journey in this safe environment. This is in a small group of 7-9 or so. So the answer to your question has to do with the purpose of the group or rather the way the material is presented. Is the intent of the group to educate/impart info or to engage in spiritual development while creating a deep bond with one another? Is it education, advocacy, shared interests or shared ministry?

Covenant groups embrace the purpose of shared ministry. The length of the group doesn't seem to matter too much (six months or 9 months, etc.). Our mini-covenant groups are only 3 sessions and draw in lots of newcomers and those people not sure whether the covenant group model works for them. We find that once people realize they can share safely and won't be questioned, the magic of covenant groups happens. When group members are listened to in this deep way, ! they are hooked! There is a hunger for connectedness, for being listened to without judgment or advice. Once they are hooked, they sign up again and again no matter how long or short the series is.

We have also found that our affinity groups, education groups and advocacy groups in the church have grown in appeal and in impact by adding components of the covenant group such as deep listening (listening from the heart rather than from the head). We are beginning to see the covenant group process enriching all aspects of the church in this way. We're happy to share the "magic formula" of deep and appreciate listening to all groups.

I hope this is helpful. I love that you are exploring new avenues to broaden and heighten the power of the small group ministry process.

Alicia Hawkins

RESPONSE FROM REV. HELEN ZIDOWECKI

I am writing in response to the questions raised by Kathy Foldes in the last CGN. I start with a reminder that the focus of small group ministry is opportunity for intimacy and ultimacy with a focus on spiritual growth. The covenant is necessary grounding for allowing deeper sharing from personal experience. (Further discussion is in "Basic Elements of Small Group Ministry" on the Network website, Online Resources.)

And now to Small Group Ministry and educational programs. The determining factor is the FOCUS of the group: education, with the focus on information and understanding of a topic, or ministry, with the focus on caring and spiritual development on the other end. Along that line, it is important how we frame the questions. In education, the questions are directed toward particular information, conclusions, or direction. This can include even reacting to a reading or song that has been introduced. In small group ministry, the questions encourage stories, sharing and discovery, and may take the interactions in various directions. Material that is introduced, including the Opening Words and any introduction to the Topic/Activity set the stage but do not give direction to the dialogue.

Another factor is the USE OF MATERIAL. Small group ministry and covenant groups span a range from simpler format to more complex. In the simpler format, the participants attend a session with minimal preparation and engage the topic at that time and space. (There may be sessions that require planning, like bringing specific items to share.) The complexity increases with the amount of preparation prior to the session, making the session appear to be more like an educational program. The critical factor is the focus of the background and the role it plays in the session. In education, the material contains information that is expected to influence or be part of the session. The information source, then, is more external. In ministry, the background material, when such is used, is intended to stimulate personal reflection and stories. When participants are expected to bring responses to share, the session may appear to be more of a 'course.' A critical factor is the spontaneity that comes from the sharing, so that the information source is internal.

A series of sessions focused on specific topic can be developed as a an educational program or as a small group ministry series, depending on the intent, the way the material is presented, and the engagement of the themes by the participants. A focused series, by the nature of the continuous topic, may appear to be more of an educational program. And the intent has to be very clear. It is also possible

to have a designated amount of time for focus on information then to have a designated time for a small group session, taking the essence of the theme for participants. However, this small group session needs to follow the basic elements, especially related to how questions are asked.

The complicating concept is that many of the components of small group ministry can be used with and actually enhance educational programs. I would suggest that you see "Small Group Ministry and Lifespan Faith Development" on the network web site Online Resources for more discussion.

But now we are getting into food for another article, "Emerging Opportunities for Small Group Ministry." Walter Lafore and I presented such a discussion at the Small Group Ministry Summer Institute at The Mountain, August 2008, and will prepare an article from our notes.

Kathy's question about other types of groups relates to discussion of affinity groups. In "Implementing Small Group Ministry" (website, Online Resources) under Groups, we have this comment. "Affinity groups have a specific focus or approach to the SGM topic and process. (If the priority is the affinity, it may not truly be small group ministry.)"

Helen Zidowecki