

From The Grassroots To The Skies

Rev. Robert Hill, *Covenant Group News*, March 12, 2002

Covenant Group Ministry is no longer in the stage of learning to walk. I have just returned from CONVO (convocation of 450 ministers, Birmingham, AL). Our grassroots movement has taken flight!

I spoke about Covenant Group Ministry and the ministers met daily in Covenant Groups. At lunchtime one day, we requested ministers to stand if they are serving churches that have (by whatever name) Covenant Group Ministry.

"Certainly well over half," I thought as I looked out over the room. I checked with two independent observers who had been in good vantage points. "At least 70% stood up," one said. "About 75%," the other said. The percentage of those standing grew even larger when I asked to see those serving churches that are planning to begin Covenant Group Ministries within a year.

I am amazed and pleased. A couple of years ago members of the Center for Community Values (CCV) joined me in striving to promote this method of church organization well enough so that every congregation in the UUA would at least considered small-group ministry within three years. That now seems attainable, perhaps likely.

Glenn Turner, former District Executive in the Northeast; Calvin Dame and his Augusta, ME, church; pioneers such as Jim Robinson and Brent Smith; as well as many of the readers of this newsletter, both lay and clergy, deserve credit for this.

And credit does seem to be the correct word. Minister after minister told me stories of their churches' being strengthened, even revitalized, by their small-group ministries. It was great to meet some of them at

CONVO after conversing with them by email for months.

What's next? Flight is wonderful, but sustained flight is best, and we should be aware that we are still in the learning curve.

SOME THINGS WE ARE CLEAR ABOUT

Covenant Group Ministry works because of the combination of (a) facilitators engaged in shared ministry with (when available) clergy, (b) groups kept to about ten at maximum, (c) the emphasis on an empty chair to symbolize those who need us whom we have not yet reached, (d) the birthing of new groups in one way or another, (e) the use of readings and check-ins and check-outs, and (f) the covenants of group interaction and service to the church and the larger community.

Areas of concern still being worked out include finding better ways of encouraging the birthing of new groups when current Covenant Group members fear new folk would compromise their close connections with each other (despite the fact that most of them were "new folks" to each other only a short time before).

Also, some ministers, I understand, are experimenting with limited-time Covenant Groups. Some are being established to last a year or less, although Jim Robinson, in Brewster, MA, says his experience is that, without time limits, one in three Covenant Groups will last ten years.

As one would expect, we are learning as we go, and I am greatly encouraged to discover that the basic elements of Small Group Ministry are in place in so many of our congregations now, less than five years after Glenn Turner and others began promoting

them. This degree of acceptance of a way of building trust through listening better to each other may be coming none too soon.