

Getting To Know You: The Prequel

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Note from Bob Hill, CGN Editor. Judy Welles and Duane Fickeisen arrived in Boiling Springs, Pennsylvania, in the summer of 1997 as the first ministers of a "fast start" congregation, the Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley. Following the suggestion of Larry Peers & Margaret Beard of the UUA Extension Department, they used a method of getting to know their new parishioners which they now think of as "a Covenant Group prequel."

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We wanted to get to know the 50-plus people who made up our membership as quickly as possible. Here's how we did it.

We asked the Membership Committee to set up a series of "getting to know you" evenings at members' homes. One person did all the organizing for this; we just told her what nights we were available for the next 3 months or so, and she made all the arrangements, then informed us where to go when.

Each gathering had four to six people in attendance, not counting us. Since our congregation's members are scattered over a large geographic area, we asked the organizer to group by location when possible, and also to try to have people who didn't already know each other well in each group.

Most sessions were held in the evening, but we included a few Sunday afternoons for the sake of flexibility. The host family was asked to offer coffee/tea and dessert, which gave us the opportunity for small talk and settling in before the evening's program began. We had already told everyone we had an agenda for the rest of the evening so that we could get to know them.

After a brief welcome and introduction, we gave everyone our business card and suggested they carry them in their wallets so they could call us from the hospital or wherever/whenever they needed to reach us. (Because some of our members had never been part of a church before, it was a simple way to show them that we are here to serve them. More than once this gesture brought tears.)

Then we asked them four questions, one at a time. We invited people to share whatever they were comfortable sharing, asked them to treat each other's stories with tender care, and invited folks to contact us later if they preferred to make an appointment to talk in more depth privately. One of us conducted the conversation while the other one took notes, which were later transcribed into a pastoral database on our home computer. It has been helpful on several occasions in the subsequent two years to have access to family information, health issues, and the like. We continue to add information to the database as we spend more time with people.

The four questions we asked were:

1. *Tell us the highlights of your life story in 5 to 10 minutes.* Usually this included family of origin, education, relationships, family information, careers, and religious journey. Most had trouble keeping it to 5-10 minutes, and we found we needed to monitor the time. Many told us no one had ever asked them this before nor attended to their story as though it really mattered.
2. *What's "on top" for you right now?* That is, where is your attention and energy going? What are you excited about, concerned about, dreading, pondering, celebrating? Often the responses to this question were

about job-related or family-related issues, sometimes health, sometimes-deeper spiritual questions.

3. *How do you anticipate/hope/expect that your relationship with this congregation will affect your life?* This was a great way to get ideas for programming, sermons, and so forth.

4. *What questions do you have for us?* Often their questions were some version of "Do you like us and will you stay here?" Another popular question was "What is your plan for us?" which gave us an opportunity to talk about shared ministry and the way we would all come up with a plan together.

In the course of these evenings we gleaned a lot of ideas about what people were interested in, the kinds of experiences they had had which could be helpful in a church setting, etc. As a result, we often know who might be interested in pursuing a certain Adult R.E class, helping us prepare a Sunday service on a certain topic, serving on a particular task force, etc. We learned things about people that one would be unlikely to discover in a coffee hour conversation.

And, equally important, five other people also learned this information. So by the end of the process, we had a bunch of little cohorts who had heard each other's life stories and know each other in some depth.

On nearly every occasion, some link among the people emerged; one evening all were writers, another evening all had lived at some point in northern New York state, another evening several of the women had had miscarriages or were coping with infertility issues, another time five out of seven were cancer survivors. The sharing was very powerful.

This process was quite time-consuming for us, taking place two or three nights per week over several months, but definitely worth

doing. We pushed for, and got, virtually 100% participation of the membership at the time. As the year progressed, when new people joined the congregation, we continued scheduling "getting to know you" sessions as soon as we had a critical mass of 4 or 5, so that everyone would have a similar shared experience of engaging more deeply with one another as part of making a place for themselves in the congregation.

GETTING TO KNOW YOU BETTER

In the fall of 1998, when we had been here for a year, people started asking us if we were going to offer more "getting to know you" sessions. It was clear that the requests came from a deep desire to spend more time in small groups talking about topics that they had little opportunity to talk about elsewhere in their lives. So we decided to offer the experience a second time, at a deeper level.

Again, we asked someone on the Membership Committee to do the organizing, and simply gave her all the dates we were available for several months ahead. As much as possible, she tried to arrange the evenings so that people met in different constellations than the first time.

Knowing that groups suffer from amnesia, we decided to begin the post-dessert part of the evening with a repeat question, to emphasize the link between the first sessions and the second. This time we handed out sheets of paper which had the questions on them, so that they could make notes about their own answers each time and then focus their attention on whoever was speaking. We made it clear that the papers were for their use only, suggesting that they might want to take them home and use them as the basis for further journaling or personal reflection.

This time we had three questions:

1. *What's on top for you?* What are you thinking about, struggling with, wondering about, celebrating, dreading, anticipating? This is the same question we asked at the first session. Sometimes people's answers were the same, but sometimes things had changed for them over the year.

2. *What's at the core for you?* What is it that helps you manage whatever is on top? What is at the depth of your soul or spirit that sustains you? The answers to this question, of course, provided the essence of the conversation for the evening. It was a very difficult question to answer, but some people did a splendid job of articulating their faith or their worldview in response.

3. *How can we nurture your core?* How can our faith community help you develop a deeper grounding and resilience that enhances the quality and meaning of your life?

In many, many cases, people answered the third question by saying "More of this!" They appreciated the opportunity to gather in small groups and talk about what really mattered to them, and it was clear that they were hungry for more. Not only did this experience underscore our desire to provide our congregation with some kind of on-going small group experience; it also gave us many ideas for sermon topics and other programming to encourage more spiritual deepening among our members.

NOW WHAT?

Our adult membership has grown to 116, and we continue to bring in new members at a steady rate, though the growth curve has flattened out somewhat. During our second year, the opportunity arose for us to purchase a Methodist church building, so we now find ourselves the proud owners of a church home which we are not likely to outgrow soon. We have a healthy infrastructure of committees and working groups, and, in our third year, we have

accomplished many of the "nuts and bolts" tasks that we thought would take five years or more.

Clearly it is time to pay attention to other kinds of growth than numerical growth. Many events and incidents in our congregational life remind us that this is still a very new congregation. Our history with one another is shallow; our "traditions" are, at most, two years old; people are still grappling for ways to get to know one another better, deepen their personal relationships with one another, and enrich their spiritual lives.

The experience of offering these two levels of "getting to know you" sessions suggests that this congregation is ripe for covenant groups of the kind that Bob Hill, Glenn Turner, Mike McGee, Brent Smith, Chuck Gaines and many of our other colleagues have described. We are deeply grateful to them for the rich array of possibilities they have outlined, and we are now poised to begin offering Covenant Groups for anyone interested, probably beginning with the congregational leadership (by invitation) and branching out into the whole congregation a few months later.