

*In July, The Rev. Calvin Dame of Augusta, ME, wrote in Issue #7 of CGNews about his church's experiences of Small Group Ministries, which are also known as Covenant Groups or meta-church groups. Now the Augusta Unitarian Universalist Community Church is in its second church year with Small Group Ministries (SGMs) in place, so we asked Calvin if he had any further thoughts about this form of church organization. He did, and his reflections will be a major part of this and the next CGNews. Rev. Bob Hill, Editor*

### **LESSONS, ADAPTATIONS, SURPRISES by Rev. Calvin Dame, Augusta, ME**

The Rev. Glenn Turner (District Minister) introduced our congregation to the Meta Church ideas at an all-church fall retreat in 1998, saying, essentially, that people come to our congregations seeking intimacy and spiritual growth, and intentional small groups are a better way to meet those needs.

An ad hoc group met through the winter researching and planning, keeping the congregation and Board informed as we went along. In April we held an informational and sign-up evening. Forty-three people signed up. Five groups were formed and meetings began in May. We call this our Small Group Ministry Program or SGM Program.

Groups meet every two or three weeks, and the effect on energy level in the congregation was immediate. People were very excited and pleased with new connections they had made and with the discussions that took place. A group of older folks in the congregation asked for and got a daytime group, and most groups continued to meet through the summer.

We now have eight groups (one meets just once a month), involving nearly 80 people in a congregation of 170. I have a list of a half dozen more people who would like to become members of a group, as well as a number who want to wait until after the holidays. Small-group ministry continues to energize this congregation!

Here are some of the lessons, adaptations and surprises that we have met along the way:

#### *MEMBERS, NEW, LONG-TIME AND RETURNING*

I had envisioned this program as most useful as an option to offer new people as they moved into the congregation, as a way to offer them a firm and deep connection. This has not occurred. Our church has more new families and single folks this fall than usual, and we worked to let them know about the SGM Program.

But just entering into the life of the congregation, getting children settled into the RE Program and figuring out what we are about seems to be enough for our new members to do. Only now am I beginning to get small-group inquiries from the people who have come to us in September or October.

Established members are the ones who have been signing up, as they have heard the positive reports. And here was one surprise: members who had fallen away (though not far enough to get dropped from the newsletter list) have come back specifically to join groups, saying: "This is what we wanted from church, so we have come back!"

#### *FACILITATORS*

Our first five small-group leaders were a part of the original planning group; since then I have trained three more. I meet with the Facilitators each month, we share stories, feedback and ideas, and we plan ahead. I am still learning about how to train new facilitators (more on this later).

We make sure everyone knows that facilitators are not therapists and they are not always in charge of running the meetings, since in some groups that responsibility is shared. All the tasks, in fact, such as meeting reminders and calling an absent member, can be shared.

The facilitator makes sure things are assigned and done, keeps the goals and commitments of the Small Group Ministry Program in mind, and connects back to facilitators group and the minister.

### *SESSION PLANS*

We have a growing loose-leaf notebook of Session Plans on a variety of topics which I have written up, and groups follow these plans. The plans look much like any of our curriculum lessons. They include:

1. a reading/chalice lighting,
2. a check-in,
3. a topic,
4. and, at the end, "Likes & Wishes"
5. and a reading.

Sessions are two hours, and we stress beginning and ending on time. When new ideas for session topics arise in groups, I incorporate them into Session Plans, writing questions that invite participation. Groups follow their own inclinations in the discussion, but they stay connected with other groups by beginning with the same questions. I have witnessed some great connections being made by people of different small groups as they swapped stories at coffee hour about how their groups differed in their responses to the same Session Plan.

### *ADDING MEMBERS TO GROUPS*

I wondered how this would work, assigning members to groups that were already underway. It has not been a problem. New people are easily brought into the group.

### *SPLITTING OFF NEW GROUPS*

The meta-church model, which we largely have followed, calls for growth to occur by splitting off a new group when the original group grows beyond ten. We took this commitment to heart, and the facilitators are on board with this idea.

We have facilitators in training who can lead the new groups. From the beginning, everybody is told to expect that their group may divide so that we may accommodate new members, and keep things fresh.

Everyone is committed to this in theory, and almost nobody wants to do it. They say they are bonded, they say they'll do it in a while. We are working on this.

### *TROUBLED MEMBERS*

If your experience is like mine, you know that one deeply needy person can kill a whole group. Carl George, in writing about the meta-church model, speaks of "extra-care-needed" members. We have a couple, but this group process, as simple as it seems, has turned out to be wonderfully strong. There has been some turbulence, but so far no damage. I stay in touch and available for consultation and encouragement.

-- The Rev. Calvin Dame