

Engagement Groups: Bringing Forth the Future From the Past

By Thandeka

Small Group Ministries are transforming the religious landscape of Unitarian Universalism in the United States. Known as Covenant Groups, Chalice Circles, or Shared Ministry Groups, these groups are revitalizing the spiritual life of our congregations. Engagement Groups, as they are to be called in England, have the power to similarly revitalize Unitarian and Free Christian churches here.

Five perspectives are needed to understand this transformative power of Small Group Ministries. Each of these perspectives can be thought of as a snapshot, an image for the imagination, a way of seeing what happens to persons who have experienced a change of heart when they become involved in the Small Group Ministries project in the States.

The first perspective focuses on the event itself. Six to twelve persons gather together in someone's home. They have been drawn together by a common interest, affinity, or activity, and they have decided to meet together on a regular basis. They meet together for two hours, once or twice a month. Sometimes they meet in the church, but most of the time they meet in each other homes. Each group has a facilitator, who helps to keep the group focused on and working toward the accomplishment of the group's own purposes. Once a month, the facilitators of all the groups meet together to talk about their own experiences. They meet with the minister as their own Small Group Ministry. And the ideal is that the minister meets with other ministers in the area in a minister's Small Group Ministry.

Each session begins and ends with a ritual, a simple exercise that experientially affirms the members' spiritual life as part of a beloved community. I recommend a simple opening exercise. The members of the group simply sit quietly and listen to the sounds in the room, focus steady attention on an object, pay attention to the rise and fall of their own breath, or practice other forms of concentration that tend to relax their bodies and quiet their minds so that they can be fully present to and with each other. Then, each person has the opportunity to talk about what's going on in her or his life. After this brief check-in, the content of the meeting is based on the group's collective decision. Work on the mutually agreed-upon topic might include discussion of a novel, conversation about child-rearing practices, study of theology, or investigation of a religious text, or any other topic or activity consistent with the fundamental principles of the sponsoring organization. Each meeting ends as it began, with a ritual that re-affirms the embodied feelings of the group as the presence of each person for each member of the group.

Several times a year, all the members of the group work together on a project in service to their larger community. They do this work of community service as part of their practice of right relationship with themselves, each other, and the world.

We can augment this imaginative perspective by listening to the comments of two participants in the Small Group Ministry program led by the Rev. Calvin Dame in the Unitarian Universalist Community Church in Augusta, Maine. Each participant tries to describe in words a sentiment, a feeling, a shift in thinking that has occurred because of her or his participation in the program.

Participant: I felt pretty lost and outside of the church. Having [met] the people in my group in their homes and gotten to know their stories gives me a deeper connection to them and the church itself. I know them and I like that they know me as well.

Participant: It has challenged my thinking covering many spiritual topics. It has supported me emotionally. It has nurtured my soul. It has made me feel part of a community of wonderful, caring people.

Participant: The important thing to me about being part of the Small Group Ministry has been the sense of community that has developed. During the year we have shared many meaningful parts of our lives: the death of a parent, the difficulties of growing older, the joys of a child's achievement; a daughter's wedding, the building of a house; a loved one's depression. We have come to know other's pets, learned about each other's families, walked through each other's gardens, sat around in each other's homes. The sharing of all our highs and lows, the profound and the mundane bits and pieces of our lives has brought to me a feeling of intimacy with other members of our church to the greatest degree that I have known since I joined the church in 1975.¹

These words and images let our minds focus attention on a human sentiment, the sense of belonging to and being cared for in small, particular ways by members of one's own religious community. Week after week, month after month, year after year, these groups meet together as a religious practice of right relationship. They bring in new members. The groups grow, change, and multiply.

Our second perspective is historical. Here, we find a birds-eye view of the history of small groups of people who have gather together as a self-conscious act of worship. We see small engagement groups as the house churches of primitive Christianity. "Where two or more are gathered in my name," Jesus told them, "I am there among them."² These small groups were the church. The Rev. Bob Hill makes this point in his article entitled "A Brief History: The Roots of Covenant Groups." It can be argued "that Christianity had its infancy in small-group organization and lost a source of vitality when, in the third century, church buildings began to be put up. Until then, Christians met almost exclusively in small groups in homes."³

When these small groups are viewed from the perspective of today's large evangelical Christian churches that have their own Small Group Ministries as a vehicle for evangelism and member assimilation, they see the Trinity at work in humankind. Not surprisingly, the guru of evangelical Christian Small Group Ministries Carl George, in a chapter entitled "You Serve a Power God" in his book, *Nine Keys to Effective Small Group Leadership*, explains the power of Small Group Ministries in Trinitarian terms:

When Christians come together in the name of the Lord Jesus, there is a special sense of His presence—a sacrament of sorts in the sense of outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual graces.... Beautiful expressions of the Holy Spirit also take place as a person with one set of spiritual gifts interacts with those who have received other gifts.⁴

George's orthodox Christian perspective is firmly rooted in biblical precedent: Exodus 18:12-37. In this passage, Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, tells Moses, "The work is too heavy for you, you cannot handle it alone." George refers to this biblical passage to explain why Moses must organize the tribes of Israel into "small groups," thus establishing "a new precedent in Israel's law."⁵ This precedent carries forward as a rationale for Christian practice. George's biblically based conviction is that "the Holy Spirit officially commissions *every* believer into a ministry of caring for one another."⁶

The seventeenth-century, pietistic perspective of Philip Jacob Spener would focus our attention of the human heart. He began the pietistic movement in Germany to revitalize the human experience of the power of divine encounter with God. To this end, Spener emphasized "*ecclesiolae in ecclesia* (little churches within the church) to promote a revival of practical and devout Christianity."⁷ He focused on small groups as "little churches within the church" in order to revitalize the pious feelings of Protestants.⁸

In the eighteenth century, in Europe and the United States, these small groups of Pietists were called "Tropes," which had been formed by Brethren in various denominations so that the diversity of belief within Protestantism could be safeguarded and assured. Thus were there Lutheran, Reformed, and Moravian Tropes. All of the Tropes, we are told by Jacob John Sessler in his book *Communal Pietism Among Early American Moravians*, were bound together by their spiritual ties rather than by their discrete creedal claims. These little churches within churches viewed themselves as part of the Invisible Church Universal. All of these little churches were united by the experience of a change of heart.⁹ The link between them was not creedal, but feeling, the affective attunement of self with another that overflows in each person as an intense body-based feeling of energy, generated collectively by the group but experienced individually by each member of the group. This regenerative energy created by the interchange of excitement among persons increased as the exchange went back and forth among the participants. This back and forth play of energy generated more energy so that the group itself generated more energy than that created by its individual members. The sum, in short, was greater than its parts. This "excess" of energy, as sociologist of religion Emile Durkheim would say, this increase in energy flowed into each member of the group as a rejuvenating power that uplifts, heals and renews. This overflow of

energy was experienced as the group's spiritual center, fueled the individual's drive for collective action, and gave each participant the experience of being born again. These Pietists gathered together in small communities in order to have the intimate ground of community and reflection we all need. They were able in these small groups to create the space to live sacramental lives.

Great Britain, of course, has its own perspective on small groups. By the end of the eighteenth-century, as Peter Clark reminds us in his book, *British Clubs and Societies: 1580-1800: The Origins of an Associational World*, small groups "had turned Britain into an associational society."¹⁰ Henry VIII, as Clark aptly reminds us, knew the power of such engaged gatherings and "suffered repeated spasm of anxiety over popular gatherings in public spaces." Such gatherings were often the space needed to generate religious dissent, political disorder, and social rebellion.¹¹ We are here today because Theophilus Lindsey and his wife Hannah believed in the power of Small Group Ministry.

Our third perspective focuses on a shift that turned a skeptical minister into a believer when the Small Group Ministry program began in his own church. As a member of the Board of Directors of the Unitarian Universalist Association and pastor of the Unitarian Universalist Community Church in Augusta, Maine, the Rev. Calvin Dame dismissed the notion that Small Group Ministry could help his church. So his congregation waited for him to go on sabbatical to begin the program:

While I was on Sabbatical at the beginning of 1998, Glenn Turner [a Unitarian Universalist minister and District Executive who began to advocate for Small Group Ministries within our association] preached to the UUCC congregation and talked about the promise which a small group model of congregational life might hold for a church community such as ours. That fall, our congregation held its first All Church Retreat at a local YMCA Camp, and the leaders wanted to invite Glenn to come and expand on his ideas.

I was not enthusiastic. I was tired of trying to sell new approaches to church life to the congregation, and I was skeptical of the idea that people would commit to more meeting in their lives. It seemed to me that getting people out to Committee meetings and church functions was already like pulling teeth, so I could not imagine that anyone would make an open ended commitment to come out twice a month for anything.

It turns out I was wrong. I was wrong because I seriously underestimated the hunger in our hearts for real community and spiritual challenge and growth.¹²

As of the year 2002, there were 13 groups in his congregation and the Rev. Dame has become one of the leading advocates of the Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry movement. He lists some of the results of this program in his church, in his *Resource Book for Small Group Ministry*: "our membership has grown in real numbers for the first time in years, our most recent canvass came in with a twenty-six percent increase, and our RE Teaching Teams are over subscribed for the coming year at the third week of August." His 176-year-old church now has 209 members, and a church school program of more than 100 children. In 1998, there were 167 members of his church. His

church has begun a capital campaign for a new building. The old model of ministry, in short, made the growth of most churches difficult, if not, at times, impossible.

These kinds of success stories wrought by Small Group Ministries within his church forced the Rev. Dame to examine the model of ministry he had observed as a child and which he been trained to continue when he was in seminary. He realized, he said, that this model of ministry “limited the size of the congregation to the number of people to whom I could provide pastoral care. It also suggested that professional training and advanced degrees were somehow required for the kind of human exchange we think of as ministry. This limited the participation of the members of the congregation, while at the same time relieving them of responsibility for the quality of the life of the congregation.”¹³

The Rev. James A. Robinson, minister at the First Parish church in Brewster Massachusetts, recounts a similar story about the effects of a Small Group Ministry program in his church. When he began his ministry in 1982, the church had 130 members. He began with two small groups. Today, his church has 750 adult members and 80 children. This growth, the Rev. Robinson said, “would not have happened without small groups.” He calls this work the ministry of his life, a calling, a type of ministry very “different from the old model in which the minister dominates.”¹⁴

The insights of the Reverend Glenn Turner, one of our leaders in the Small Group Ministries movement today, can help us make further sense of this new model of ministry. He has identified the difference between the old and new form of ministry as a change within the organizational structure of the church from a “minister” centered focus to a “ministry” centered focus.¹⁵ This shift occurs, the Rev. Turner observes, because Small Group Ministries offer persons a sustained and ongoing place for intimacy and spiritual growth in their lives. The Rev. Turner is well aware of the problem this new form of ministry addresses: “We live in a time when real participation and involvement in groups and civic organizations is markedly shrinking. Too often, what passes for ‘individualism’ is a withdrawal from the institutions which have long helped to carry and sustain our communal lives.”¹⁶ Not surprisingly, the Rev. Turner observes, “our growth has stagnated relative to the general population.”¹⁷ This is a spiritual problem, the Rev. Turner concludes, that neither new fund-raising techniques nor new handbooks for better board operations will correct. We are faced with a problem of intimacy, a spiritual problem that only a spiritual solution can address.¹⁸

The fourth perspective focuses our attention more pointedly on the problem of intimacy. Here, we find two images, both of which focus our attention on unvoiced and unmet needs of congregants within their own churches.

The first image captures a scene from an evening I spent discussing Small Group Ministries in a New England Church. At the end of my formal remarks, I asked the members of the audience if they might be willing to simply get together in small groups over a meal and talk about their unmet needs in their church. One of the most respected elder statesmen of the church stood up and slowly walked to the front of the assembly,

faced his friends and fellow congregants and said he was interested in joining such a group. He had wanted something like this for years, he said, because he was lonely. “I do not have any friends,” he finally confessed. Waves of shock rolled through the gathering. How could he be lonely? He was a revered and beloved member of the congregation, a pillar of the church. Many persons expressed incredulity. Several persons were dismayed. A few shouted “no.” When the group quieted down, the man spoke again, saying “Every man in this room who is my age knows what I am talking about. Our social upbringing has taught us not to talk about our feelings. We are not supposed to be emotionally vulnerable or close to anyone except our wife.” Most of the men in the room joined a small group.

The second image is a bit more extended and begins in 1964 when I took Anthropology 101 and discovered that all human societies, all over the world, establish religions and each of these societies believes that its religion is absolutely true. If all of them are thought of as absolutely true by their adherents, and yet each of them contains claims which contradict some of the absolute claims of the others, then none of them, I realized, could be true. Therefore, I concluded, using the careful logic of a first-year college student, I must be an atheist. The following Sunday I went to the Unitarian Church in Urbana. I had seen a flyer about the church on my dormitory bulletin board. I had never been to a Unitarian church before. I wanted to stay within a religious community while I tried to make sense of what I could believe. The sermons in my new church community were logically precise, reasonable, and predictable. Eventually, I stopped going to church.

By 1982, I was a doctoral student in theology and a candidate for our ministry. I entered the First Unitarian Church of Los Angeles as its ministerial intern. During my internship, I organized evening get-togethers, put on plays, marched on picket lines, started new support groups, planned services together, and simply sat around talking to congregants. Not any one of these things, but all of them together, gave me a sense of belonging and support that I had never before experienced in my life. At the end of my internship, one of the diehard rationalists of the church told me something I will never forget. Smiling, he pretended to frown, as he gently chastised me for what I had done during my internship: “You showed us something we need to pay attention to,” he said. “We need each other not because of what we believe but because of what we have: feelings.”

The fifth perspective is a composite picture composed of what the other four perspectives have in common. Each of the previous perspectives depicts a group of persons or an individual attempting to make sense of a particular kind of experience, one of being involved in a network of loving, supportive, and caring relationships. Each of these snapshots captures a moment of a church’s life. And yet none of them is framed by a discussion about religious belief, about what it means to be in right relationship with God as the foundation of liberal religious belief.

So what does this composite picture reveal? Is there anything particularly religious about these four images? What image comes through when all the depictions of

human engagement fade away? We have only to recall the words of James Martineau to understand how the absence of images that capture persons talking about God would seem to leave each scene underexposed or poorly developed as a religious text. “I cannot conceive of a Church,” Martineau said, “without the worship of a Living and Personal God. With this I think a Church must begin, and not end: and short of this we can have . . . only clubs or associations for particular objects, not any fusion into a common spiritual life.”¹⁹ I have not used words and images that would depict what Martineau calls “spiritual realities.”

In his preface to the 1874 edition of *Hymns of Prayer and Praise*, he tells us exactly what such a scene would feel like:

The deeper the sense of spiritual realities, the more do we live in a present that is divine; and faith so far dispenses with the past as rather to invest it with sanctity than wait for its witness and consecration. The habitual “walk with God,” hour by hour, the leaning on him in weakness, the drawing from him of strength, the conscious passing of a warm light or a chill shadow, according as he is remembered or forgotten, supersede by immediate experience the secondary attestations of divine things, and leave all scripture sacred simply by consent of sympathy and reverence. Such inward self-surrender is the true fulfillment of the Christian aim of life....²⁰

For Martineau, religion meant “belief in an Ever-living God, that is, a Divine Mind.”²¹ He called the original source of Christian life the pure and personal essence of the religion of Christ. Here, Martineau found the true fulfillment of the Christian aim of life: inward self-surrender.²² In the depths of such personal surrender, he was able to “walk with God,” hour by hour. Martineau describes what goes on between a person and God.

Our snapshots capture what goes on between persons when they attempt to act toward others as children of God. The images focus on the helping hand, the open heart, the attentive eye, the gentle smile of someone who works with others to create a beloved and supportive community.

The final perspective is the image of a circle. The individual is embraced by a community that the individual embraces. This communal embrace is the church. The church is the people who gather together to care for each other. Each individual is embraced. No one is alone. The fifth image captures this life circle, this lifeline of the people’s work, *leitourgia*, as a liturgy.

Yale University liturgy professor Aidan Kavanagh reminds us of the transformational power of the work of the people [*leitourgia*] when he describes what liturgies do: “What they produce, among other things, is ourselves.”²³ As Kavanagh notes, “The worshipping assembly never comes away from such an experience unchanged, and the assembly’s continuing adjustment to the change is not merely a theological datum but theology itself.”²⁴

When we meet each other face to face in Small Group Ministries and listen to each other's stories, we begin to reconstruct our individual lives and to make meaning in, of, for, and through the larger community. The fifth perspective displays this hour-by-hour walk with others as an hour-by-hour walk with God. From these encounters, a liturgy of personal reflection and public expression is born. Small Group Ministries create the space for the contrapuntal movements of human engagement and differentiation. They are the liturgical movements of the human heart.²⁵ Jewish philosopher Martin Buber describes such the location of these human encounters as the place between "I" and "Thou" where the healing presence of God is felt.²⁶ Twentieth-century American Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams affirms this sacred place, reminding us that we are associating beings.²⁷

We create and are created by our associations. Every moment of our lives, we actively bring together disparate sensations; we link personal feelings to mental expectations and reflections; we think of others and how they have shaped our lives and how they have helped determine our very way of being in the world. We are formed and shaped by the company we keep, the communities in which we live. We display the customs and social patterns of our associations. The very structure of the self is built up, defined, and maintained through relationships with other persons. We are the creative expressions of the families, friends, colleagues, and other persons who collectively help determine the story of our lives.

The power of Small Group Ministries is this circle. It offers us an organizational structure to solve a personal as well as a congregational problem. Both the health of the individuals and the church must be attended to at the same time. Small Group Ministries create this mediating ground between the individual and the church because they attend to the church as a community of small groups of individuals with feelings.

Small Group Ministries are liturgies for relating interdependently. The liturgical work of creating community together enables each member of the group to feel that he or she is astir with creation.²⁸ It is practical theology writ small. Churches grow because the individuals are gathered in and nurtured as the children of a beloved God. Their spirit grows.

Martineau recognized the power of liturgy to transform those who practice it. Martineau's effort to find the permanent essence of Christian thought and feeling in the midst of these transient artifacts shifted the foundation of our faith from a Biblical Unitarianism to a "New Unitarianism" based on reason, conscience, and human sentiment.²⁹ Part of the foundation for this "newer Unitarianism of Martineau" was piety.³⁰

Small Group Ministries engender pious feelings; they heal the human heart. This healing power is an act of right relationship. Our heart is healed through right relationship with others. Our heart was not broken alone. It cannot be healed alone. Salvation is not a solo act. To live in sacramental time means to live in right relationship with others and with the natural world. The redemptive power of our religious movement

is the sacramental act of right relationship. This power is not a creedal belief but a way of life. We know it because we live it. We create redemptive power here and now in the world, among us, between us, through us. These feelings, when held by an organization structure that supports and encourages its congregants to care for each other, are the power that can recreate and revitalize our liberal religious movement anew.

We, at the Center for Community Values, would like to help you use this ever-present spiritual power within the heart of our tradition. Together, we can create a new structure of engagement and renewal for our congregations.

Thank you.

¹ Calvin O. Dame, *A Small Ministry Resource Book*. This book can be downloaded from the Center for Community Value's website (www.the-ccv.org), 11.

² Matthew 18:20 NRSV.

³ Bob Hill, "A Brief History: The Roots of Covenant Groups," in *A Covenant Group Source Book* (Chicago: The Center for Community Values, 2001), 16-17.

⁴ Carl F. George with Warren Bird, *Nine Keys to Effective Small Group Leadership* (Mansfield, PA: Kingdom Publishing, 1997), 9.

⁵ Carl F. George, *Prepare Your Church for the Future* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Barker Book House Co., 1991), 121-122.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁷ Jacob John Sessler, *Communal Pietism Among Early American Moravians* (New York: Henry Holt and Co.), 1966, 6.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 24ff.

¹⁰ Peter Clark, *British Clubs and Societies 1580–1800: The Origins of an Associational World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 469.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹² This document can be downloaded from the Center for Community Values website (www.the-ccv.org).

¹³ Calvin O. Dame, "Transforming Ministry: Some Reflections on Loss," in *A Covenant Group Source Book* (www.the-ccv.org), 13.

¹⁴ Phone interview with the Rev. James A. Robinson for the Center for Community Values, March 2, 2001.

¹⁵ Glenn Turner, "Transforming Our Ministries with Small Group Ministry."

¹⁶ Glenn Turner, "Designing and Implementing a "Small Group Ministry" Focus for Your Congregation,"

1. Available on the CCV website (www.the-ccv.org).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ James Martineau and Thomas Sadler, *Common Prayer for Christian Workshop* (1862). Cited by Horton Davies in *Worship and Theology in England*, Vol. IV, 272n.

²⁰ Martineau, viii-ix.

²¹ James Martineau, *A Study of Religion, Vol. 1*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888), 1.

²² Martineau, viii.

²³ Aidan Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 85.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 76.

²⁵ I think here of Don Michael Randel's definition of contrapuntal motion in music as "motion regulated by direction, by rhythmic differentiation, and by separation." There is in such movement, he says, both "consonance and dissonance." This description is found in the "Counterpoint" entry in his book, *The New Harvard Dictionary of Music* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1986), 205.

²⁶ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1958), 75ff.

²⁷ James Luther Adams, "My Social Concern," in *Voluntary Associations: Socio-cultural Analyses and Theological Interpretation*, ed. J. Ronald Engel (Chicago: Exploration Press, 1986), 10.

²⁸ This notion of the human being astir with creation can be traced back to the foundational insights of Friedrich Schleiermacher, the father of modern Protestant Theology. An extended discussion and analysis of these insights is found in my book, *The Embodied Self: Friedrich Schleiermacher's Solution to Kant's Problem of the Empirical Self* (Albany, New York: The State University of New York Press, 1995).

²⁹ Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England: From Watts and Wesley to Martineau, 1690-1900*, Vol. IV (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), 267-81.

³⁰ *Ibid.*