

The Meta-Church in the Northeast

Rev. Glenn Turner, District Minister, *Covenant Group News* November 27, 1998

Note from Bob Hill, Editor. Since 1982, Glenn has been District Minister in the Northeast District (NED), which [was] made up of 33 societies in Maine, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island. In the Fall of 1997, the Interim Minister at First Parish in Portland, Maine, Rev. Francis Buckmaster, introduced Glenn to the work of Carl George of the Fuller Institute in California, the most prominent proponent of meta-church organization for churches. "The term 'meta' could be likened to 'metta' - the Buddhist focus on developing loving-kindness," Glenn says, "but really means transformation." Either way, the concept of Covenant Groups is based on the meta-church techniques to which Carl George and Glenn refer.

I had been working with congregations to reduce the kind of institutional maintenance work that burns us out. Too few people for too many jobs.

We need to free our people to get from church what they say they want when they join. What do they want? They want opportunities for spiritual growth, community, friendships. What do they get? Opportunities to serve on building and grounds committees, the canvass, the board.

I thought that Northeast District, a district of small congregations, was unique until I discovered that TWO-THIRDS of the 1,034 UU congregations in North America have fewer than 150 members, and 83% have fewer than 250 (the classic definition of a "small" church).

SINGLE CELL

We have thought of the small church as a single cell operation, as a place where

everyone knows everyone and everyone does everything together. Whereas, in the Program Church or full-service church, small groups predominate, serving people's needs. I looked at data for more than 500 of our Association's churches and discovered that only eight of them crossed the statistical line from below 150 to above 150 in a ten year interval, 1987-97. Eight out of more than 500!

Why the reluctance to grow larger? Especially when surveys show that people in our culture have a marked preference for huge churches and their offerings? Is it because of the reluctance to lose the single cell, to lose the sense of community?

This is ironic because experience has taught me that the small church single cell concept is actually a myth. There may be one to three very small cells or cliques in the small church, but everyone does not know everyone else equally well. In fact, the newcomer may rise to be Religious Education Director or Chair of the Board and still not be part of the invisible cells made up of long-term members. Some newer members may last for ten years and finally throw in the towel. In fact, our small churches are constantly hemorrhaging members.

Roy Oswald of the Alban Institute says that *the determining factor in whether a newcomer stays or goes is whether they make six friends in their first six months of attending*. Too few do that. Most continue to feel that they are peripheral members of the group.

Long term members fear they will lose intimacy if the church grows. The latest person to join, who is still not integrated into the group, may collude with the long-timer

because of fearing that more members means even more difficulty in cracking the inner circle of already existing cliques or cells. What should happen and doesn't is this: the creation of intentional, small, relational groups. Most of our churches have too few small groups. This is what the meta-church is all about.

I once thought more programs were the answer, even if people resisted the idea of the "Program Church." But authors like Kennon Callahan and Carl George have helped me to tease out the subtle differences between program groups and relational groups (call them "Covenant Groups" - a la Bob Hill).

"JOYS AND CONCERNS" IN DEPTH

Program groups focus more on content, on teaching, and have less opportunity for personal sharing. Covenant Groups focus on relationships. They provide ministry. It's "joys and concerns" in on-going depth. More importantly they give their members encouragement and support from many perspectives.

The laws of group dynamics are applied: no more than 14 in a group (ideally, 10). They have a leader and an assistant leader who meet regularly with the church's staff. The groups meet one to four times a month. The more they meet, the more effective they are. For a part of each meeting, they may have a theme focus peculiar to the faith of the sponsoring church, but a third of the time is spent in the intimate sharing of the participants' lives.

We don't do much of that in our churches. There are some men's and women's groups that do it. Programs such as Build Your Own Theology and Cakes for the Queen of Heaven have come close. For many, such programs were entry-points into our churches. They turned them on, gave them what they wanted. But, only a fraction of our people are involved with such groups. In the

small church it's a minute percentage. For most, our churches provide a diet of worship once a week, potluck dinners every few weeks, and a Unitarian Universalist orientation class once in each lifetime.

In the large "meta-churches" (which can grow into the tens of thousands), 80% of their people or more are involved in a small group on a regular basis. And, their churches are providing growth in depth as well as breadth.

RUNNING IN PLACE

Over the last 18 years, the congregations in the NED have been, like many other areas, running in place, even losing a little. Frankly, I think, so long as we do what we've always done, we are sitting on the franchise. We have a strong religious message, but we lose it when we lose a "ministry" focus, when we focus our attention on intellectualizing more than relating, on our past more than our present and future, on photo-op posturing more than a commitment to bring into our churches those people on whose behalf we presume to speak.

The Unitarian Universalist faith should not remain captive to a white, well-educated, affluent culture. Our humanity is something we share in common -- hopes, fears, dreams. I believe the meta-church with its base of Covenant Groups offers us the possibility of unprecedented growth with both a significant ministry to our members and outreach to our communities.

There are several things we are doing in the Northeast District to explore the possibility of tailoring the meta-church to meet our needs and our constituency.

One is that the District Minister has sermon, will travel: "The Once and Future Church." Secondly, I am working with the ministers to study the Meta-Church concepts.

We began with a NED-UUMA Ministers' Retreat in September, focusing on the first of five videos "Share the Vision" videos by Carl George. The NED-UUMA chapter will be spending five more of our meetings this year viewing and discussing the videos. At each session, a different minister will present the material.

Several people have borrowed George's books, which we also have on loan from the NED Library. We have two complete sets of his books, and two sets of videos besides other meta-church books and videos.

We have four Leadership Cluster Meetings each Fall attended by ministers, RE directors, church presidents, and other church leaders. This Fall we focused on the "Meta-Church." The feedback was positive and enthusiastic.

Prior to that, I'd presented this material at three church board retreats and one congregational retreat. I have given my meta-church sermon four times and have several more opportunities coming up, as well as more programs with congregations.

The NED Board will be appointing an ad hoc committee for helping to implement meta-church development. A five year plan is in the offing. We may make a video. But, the next step is to train the first leaders for small groups.

OUR SMALLEST CHURCHES

The hardest challenge will be to do this for congregations with no minister, our smallest churches. These churches, too, must be grown intentionally by a balance of small groups and worship. I am encouraged by the enthusiastic responses of the people who have been exposed to these ideas.

It is my intention to retire in the year 2000, but I am re-energized by this plan for shared ministry. If the churches in the NED made a good faith effort to implement such a program, I believe we could at least quadruple our membership in the next five to ten years.

How much time do we have, really, to put ourselves back on the map? This is good work!