

MINISTRY OBJECTIVES

Diana Dorroh

I will begin the exploration of Ministry Objectives for small group ministry programs in January 2010. I began thinking about the topic after reading The Seven Deadly Sins of Small Group Ministry: A Troubleshooting Guide for Church Leaders by Bill Donahue and Russ Robinson. Donahue and Robinson list "unclear ministry objectives" as the first deadly sin. They are concerned with whether a church has a program "with" small groups or is a church "of" small groups. That is, is it one of many programs or is it a program in which most of the congregation is expected to participate? I am also interested in the variety of reasons UU congregations have for starting small group ministry and whether the programs meet these expectations. Why did your church begin its small group ministry program? Has the program provided the benefits you intended? If you've had a program for a while, have those reasons changed over the years? I'd like to compile a complete list of reasons for implementing a small group ministry program.

Ministry Objectives of Small Group Ministry CGN January 2010

Let's start small, by compiling a simple list of reasons that church leaders give for starting a small group ministry program.

1. To have a place for new members to connect, and to learn about the church and Unitarian Universalism, so that they won't get lost in our church.
2. To connect current members to a group, so they won't get lost in our church.
3. To have a new way of "doing church," where almost everyone is in a group and issues and church, local and national crises can be addressed institutionally via one session plan for all groups.
4. To organize the entire church into groups so that in a local crisis, there is a natural "contact" structure and leaders automatically contact group members to assess the effect on each member and find out whether anybody needs special help.
5. To allow members to get to know many other members well.
6. To extend the work of the professional ministry by providing more ministry--more listening, acceptance,
7. To extend special care to those who are ill or in crisis, often expanding the work of the Pastoral Care Team.
8. To teach congregation members the skills of right relationship, caring, and listening.
9. To provide our members with an intense experience of intimacy and ultimacy.
10. To develop church leaders and other committed volunteers.
11. To give people an opportunity to serve, through group service projects.
12. To achieve numerical membership growth for the church.
13. To provide a forum for further discussion of Sunday sermon topics in an intimate setting.

That's a beginning. What can you add? Why does your church have a small group ministry program? Are the goals being realized? Did you have some unexpected benefits? I'd love to hear some stories. Send them to me at diana_dorroh@hotmail.com

Goals for Small Group Ministry
From Nancy Leinwand, Main Line Unitarian Church, Devon, PA

CGN Feb. 2010

(1) Why did your church start its program? What were the goals?

Main Line Unitarian Church (MLUC) began with a 'Neighborhood Circle' concept - that is, an effort to build relationship and connection among congregants who lived in geographical proximity. This concept soon yielded to the fact that time is the true measure of our lives and available hours came to determine the structure of MLUC SGM groups.

I like to go back to Rev. Stephan Papa's sermon of September 2002,* which articulates very well some of the longing and hopes for small group ministry at Main Line Unitarian Church. The church had grown larger; people struggled to maintain a sense of community and belonging. Visitors found the place hard to penetrate and dialog was needed across diverse groups and interests. The concept of small group ministry seemed to offer a new path to a more caring and connected community. At the same time, some congregants were looking for ways to deepen their personal search for meaning and expand the scope of their spiritual development. The MLUC SGM program aimed to provide a structured conversation for group members to achieve this dual purpose of deepening connection and conversation.

[*accessible at <http://www.sas.upenn.edu/~leinwand/SGM2/Content/RevPapaSer9-22-02.pdf>]

(2) Were those goals fulfilled?

For those individuals who participate in the groups, the reward has been high. A number of groups have maintained stable membership; others have experienced consistent change in membership. From time to time, groups have experienced problems with their group process or session procedures. In general, the problems have been resolved and served to inform the program leadership.

When carried out faithfully, the process of a SGM session - a structured conversation, including a guided subject matter and discussion, together with open personal sharing without outside comment - offers a unique experience to group members. Participants feel free to speak, and, what many express as most important, they feel "heard" and not "judged." A sustaining SGM group provides a life-affirming experience that offers many secondary benefits to the individuals involved as well as to the congregation as a whole.

(3) Were there other benefits?

Of course, we can't know if the growth and connection that has taken place within the SGM group experience would have happened outside the groups, but it is safe to say that the apparent benefits to individuals and the congregation are broad and varied. First, we can note many instances of informal lay care support activities among group members. In addition, SGM participation has helped integrate new members into the church community. In my own experience, I have seen instances of personal growth as a result of group participation - individuals who once found it difficult to stand in the coffee hour now chair committees and lead others in a variety of church activities. The group experience can offer individuals support through major life transitions such as retiring from work, taking care of aging parents, raising children, or going through a divorce, among other life events. The small groups have increased volunteer participation in the work of the church, and provided collective support for broader social action initiatives in the community and beyond.

(4) What would you say are the main reasons for having the program now, or main benefits, etc?

I believe that churches and congregations are always in some form of transition - whether due to changes in membership, funding, staffing, or outside events. The small groups at MLUC

comprise one very dedicated segment of the membership of the church. This dedication to the church at the small scale results in a more consistent commitment to the church as a whole. At MLUC, the original SGM program continues with a solid core of stable and committed small groups. Increasingly however, the program aims to expand the SGM value more broadly in and for the congregation. Specifically, this means providing a small group experience for as many new members as possible, and increasing the exposure to the small group experience more broadly in the congregation. I believe that the essential purposes of the program remain constant: to develop an enhanced sense of belonging in the community and to offer an opportunity for deeper personal exploration and growth through a structured session plan and conversation.

Editor's Note: Nancy Leinwand helped launch the Small Group Ministry program at Main Line Unitarian Church, is past program coordinator and steering team member, and has been a group facilitator since the program's inception in January 2003.

A Continuing Discussion of Ministry Objectives for Small Group Ministry

What a wonderful story. Thanks you, Nancy. I also enjoyed reading Rev. Stephan Papa's sermon from 2002. Nancy added at least one ministry objective to my list from January.

She said: "The small groups at MLUC comprise one very dedicated segment of the membership of the church. This dedication to the church at the small scale results in a more consistent commitment to the church as a whole." So, let's add to our list:

- to build dedication and commitment to the church, as a whole, thus increasing institutional resilience.

I've also been thinking about this benefit. At my own church, the Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge, we currently have 23 groups and about 2/3 of our 380 church members belong to one of the 23 groups. Not surprisingly, this has changed our church. I'd say that our small group ministry program has made us more resilient and has, indeed, increased commitment to the church, as well as involvement. Nancy said: "I believe that churches and congregations are always in some form of transition - whether due to changes in membership, funding, staffing, or outside events." I don't know about you, but that rings true for me. Having the groups is like having 23 solid ovals or balloons or balls inside of the largest ball of our church. You could add other groups, with their own balloons, overlapping and intersecting. I hope balloons can do that. The result is a very resilient structure. That's the image that keeps presenting itself to me.

Please send me your images and stories and reasons for doing small group ministry.

Send them to me at Diana_dorroh@hotmail.com

Here's a repeat of the questions to get you started:

- (1) Why did your church start its program? What were the goals?
- (2) Were those goals fulfilled?
- (3) Were there other benefits? and
- (4) What would you say are the main reasons for having the program now, or main benefits, etc?

Small Group Ministry Goals:

Unitarian Universalist Community Church, Augusta, ME

By Helen Zidowecki and Kathy Kellison, CGN March 2010

Editor's Note: At my request, Helen and Kathy answered the four questions I've been posing about ministry objectives or goals. Their answers describe the experience at their congregation, the Unitarian Universalist Community Church in Augusta, Maine.

(1) Why did your church start its program? What were the goals? The idea of "doing church" in a different way became an intentional part of life in the Northeast District (Maine and Eastern Provinces) in 1997. The District minister, Rev. Glenn Turner, asked the ministers as a group to study the work of Christian evangelicals around the concept of the church growth. There were presentations and small group ministry sessions at district meetings. In the spring of 1998, Glenn

Turner introduced Small Group Ministry to our congregation while leading worship. In the fall he made a persuasive presentation at our All Church Retreat.

From review of the history of our program in one of our early publications, three goals or expectations are evident, although they are not labeled as "goals" per se.

Congregational growth: If you ask people if they would like the church to grow, they would likely agree that it should grow. But when you really press them on it, they would admit that they are comfortable in the church now, and if the congregation grew too big, they are afraid that they would lose the sense of community and connection which they value.

Glenn Turner posed a question this way: "How many people are there around Augusta who might share our view of religion, and who share the values and goals we have in addressing society's needs, and who might want to be a part of a spiritual community?" He asserted that you can be a part of any size congregation, and still belong to a small group whose members know you by name and know your story.

Then Glenn made an observation that became one of our guiding principles. "People come to our congregations seeking intimacy and spiritual growth. And we give them committee meetings and Sunday morning worship. Neither of these adequately meets those needs."

Focus on Ministry. One of the first important decisions we made was the name: Small Group Ministry. We had begun to perceive and more widely express the idea that everyone is called to ministry, maintaining that the call to faith is a call to ministry, whether lay or ordained. We had developed a program of lay Pastoral Ministerial Associates. From the beginning, we envisioned our groups as a way that we could better care for one another. People would be connected at a deeper level than is possible Sunday during the Fellowship Hour, and there would be the opportunity to pursue some of the deeper spiritual questions which in our lives we so rarely take time for. But these groups would also form the framework in which we could reach out to one another in caring and support, where we could be present in each others lives in the forms that describe ministry.

Congregational Involvement. In addition to actively keeping the congregation informed throughout the organizational process, we intentionally built Small Group Ministry as a program of the congregation. We shaped our work to the formal structure of the church, involving church leadership in the organizational phases. We brought an initial and then a final proposal to the Board, asking that the Small Group Ministry Program be formally endorsed by the Board and reporting that action out to the congregation. Added to this was the expectation that the groups do a service project for the congregation at least annually.

(2) Were those goals fulfilled? It is interesting to look at these expectations 12 years later.

Congregational growth: We had not grown sustainably for a number of years for a variety of reasons, but are experiencing rapid growth this year. Small Group Ministry is a major factor in drawing people further into the fabric of the church community and to sustaining membership. And groups and sessions are expanding to allow variation that connects more people: Open Sessions related to the service on a specific Sunday of the month, the start of a men's group, sessions being developed around other things that are going on in the congregation (developing a ministry on aging, later and end of life issues, goddess traditions, etc.).

Focus on ministry: Small Group Ministry is vital to the overall ministry of the congregation. We have noticed that one of the first questions asked when we learn of a person or family in a difficult situation is, "Are they in a Small Ministry group?" The ministry, then, is also to support the Group as they minister to their member - another level of caring. We have witnessed connections made between members for additional support outside of the group meetings - phone calls, transportation to attend additional church functions or meet specific needs, e-mails. Increasingly, newer members to the congregation are finding life and spiritual connections that extend beyond the Sunday worship.

Congregational involvement

--Varies - some groups take on special tasks on a regular basis. Example: reception for the

upcoming Installation of the minister, specific work projects (painting buildings, work days), fundraisers. This needs to be reinforced in some groups to keep them connected.

--Every group that we have is seen as part of the congregational fabric. Traditionally the groups are organized around times they can meet. However, while we have couples and about half the groups include men and women, men have requested a men-specific [group?], with the same session plans available as any other group, which makes it a small group ministry group of men, rather than a "men's group".

--Small group ministry increasingly has become a vehicle for addressing a number of topics and themes. For example, our intentional welcoming focus the last few months has been on ageism, including two informal discussions and a workshop. As a ministry for older members and elders emerges, open sessions around aging and end of life issues is planned. These session plans developed for specific focuses become part of the body of session plans available to all groups.

(3) Were there other benefits?

--We have used the session format to explore events in our community such as the departure of a minister and the welcoming of a new one, and our involvement with Welcoming Congregations and the No on One [is this correct? I haven't heard of it] campaign (Marriage Equality).

--We have also found that the people seem to listen and speak more compassionately at larger gatherings, and attribute this to the practice as part of Small Group Ministry.

(4) What would you say are the main reasons for having the program now, or main benefits, etc?

It is as fundamental to our sense of ourselves as Religious Exploration. It is a major part of how we 'do church' It has cemented many friendships. Along with the Sangha (meditation) and NVC (Nonviolent Communication), it is fundamental to our learning to listen and hear one another and has contributed to getting us through some difficult times. Some of our 'needs extra care' folks have found a place to belong in the community and have become less disruptive. It has given us a solid reputation in the District and the UUA. Well over half our members have been group members at one time or another. As our worship style continues to evolve and the membership changes, there will be ongoing connections to provide continuity.

CGN March 2010 A Continuing Discussion of Ministry Objectives for Small Group Ministry By Diana Dorroh, Editor

I found it interesting that numeric growth was one of the explicit goals at the UU Community Church in Augusta. I think this was true for many of the programs that began ten years ago. The results were often a little more complex.

My own opinion is that, at a minimum, a vital small group ministry allows a church to take advantage of numerical growth opportunities when the congregation is getting an increased volume of visitors. Having a small group ministry program in place allows new people to connect quickly, satisfies their needs for intimacy and ultimacy and helps them become involved in the congregation. So, more of them join, more stay, and membership is more meaningful to them and the congregation. At the other extreme, a vital small group ministry program also helps congregations weather the inevitable transitions and crises with minimal membership loss or even slight growth.

I'm also impressed with the variety of ways this congregation has used the small group ministry session format to enhance congregational life and help with transitions. This is a growing edge of the movement and this congregation is showing us the way.

I will continue to focus on this topic of the ministry objectives or goals of small group ministry for the next few issues. Please send me your stories and reasons for doing small group ministry. Send them to me at Diana_dorroh@hotmail.com

Here's a repeat of the questions to get you started:

- (1) Why did your church start its program? What were the goals?
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A Continuing Discussion of Ministry Objectives for Small Group Ministry By Diana Dorroh, Editor, CGN April 2010

After reading Rev. Steve Crump's essay, we can add some new results of small group ministry to our list:

- teaching the art of hospitality,
- understanding that acceptance is often the first step toward positive change,
- healing souls through listening and understanding, and
- transforming society by opposing our mass culture of loneliness, consumerism, and virtual connections.

From my vantage point as Program Director of the small group ministry program at the Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge, I'd like to answer the rest of the questions I've been asking for the last three months. We began our program in 1999 to give new people a place to connect and grow spiritually. We also hoped it might develop church leaders and help us grow numerically. Those goals were all achieved, but we have, indeed, had many unintended consequences. As you can see from Rev. Steve Crump's article, the unintended consequences are now as important as the original goals.

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CGN May 2010 Wrap-up -- Ministry Objectives or Goals of Small Group Ministry by Diana Dorroh

We began this discussion in the January 2010 Covenant Group News with a partial list of goals or ministry objectives for having a small group ministry program. In the February, March, and April issues, we explored three wonderful contributions from churches with well established programs. The articles covered the original goals, goals achieved, unintended consequences, and current goals. The contributors were:

Nancy Leinwand, Main Line Unitarian Church, Devon, PA, in February

Rev. Helen Zidowecki and Kathy Kellison, Unitarian Universalist Community Church, Augusta, ME, in March, and

Rev. Steve Crump, Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge, LA, in April.

It seems to me that the goals identified in those articles fall into five categories: Connection, Ministry, Maturation (and Incarnational) Growth, Strengthening and Enriching the Church, and Transforming the World. Now that we have a fairly complete list of possible goals and, by extension, possible benefits of small group ministry, what else do we need to know? Two natural and related questions are: *Do the goals you set affect how you implement your small group ministry program? and Do your program choices or circumstances limit your ability to achieve certain goals?* My partial answers to these questions follow the lists below.

Goals and Possible Benefits of a Small Group Ministry Program

Connection

- 1) To provide a place for new members to connect to the church and become integrated into the congregation.
- 2) To provide better connection for current members.

Ministry

- 1) To extend the work of the professional ministry by providing more ministry--more listening, support, and acceptance.
- 2) To heal souls through listening and understanding.
- 3) To extend special care to those who are ill or in crisis, often expanding the work of the Pastoral Care Team.
- 4) To get people through some difficult times and thru major life transitions.

Maturation (and Incarnational) Growth

- 1) To teach congregation members the skills of right relationship, caring, and listening.
- 2) To spread understanding that acceptance is often the first step toward positive change.
- 3) To teach the art of hospitality, skills that can be used in family, work and other settings.
- 4) To provide our members with an intense experience of intimacy and ultimacy.
- 5) To give people an opportunity to serve, through group service projects.
- 6) To provide a forum for further discussion of Sunday sermon topics in an intimate setting.
- 7) To provide to "extra care needed" folks a place to belong in the community. Often, the "rough edges" are smoothed and the individuals learn to be in right relationship and become a full member of the group.

Strengthening and Enriching the Church

- 1) To build dedication and commitment to the church as a whole, thus increasing institutional resilience.
- 2) To develop church leaders and other committed volunteers.
- 3) To achieve maturational and incarnational growth of church members and, by extension, of the congregation.
- 4) To have more right relationship and covenantal behavior at church meetings and in the congregation as a whole, so that the inevitable conflicts are more civil and constructive.
- 5) To achieve numerical membership growth for the church.
- 6) To provide bridges and improved communication across existing groups and subdivisions within the church.
- 7) To get the church through some difficult times.
- 8) To have a new way of "doing church," where almost everyone is in a group, and issues and

church, local and national crises can be addressed institutionally via one session plan for all groups.

9) To organize the entire church into groups so that in a local crisis, there is a natural and up-to-date "contact" structure and leaders automatically contact group members to assess the effect on each member and find out whether anybody needs special help.

Transforming the World

1) To transform society by opposing our mass culture of loneliness, consumerism, and virtual connections.

2) To extend the principles of right relationship, caring, and listening into the larger community.

3) To teach the art of hospitality, skills that can be used in family, work and other settings.

4) To provide collective support for broader social action initiatives in the community and beyond.

Observations on the Questions: *Do the goals you set affect how you implement your small group ministry program? and Do your program choices or circumstances limit your ability to achieve certain goals?*

Each church makes choices in program structure, both as the program begins and as it continues. This set of choices, together with the basic elements of small group ministry becomes your church's model. Some of these choices are: length of term of the groups, frequency of meetings, format and frequency of facilitators meetings, origin of session materials, and availability of openings to new congregation members. Other characteristics may be beyond your immediate control, like the amount of ministerial support or budget, but still have an effect on your church's ability to achieve program small group ministry goals.

If your church has a minister, that minister's support is essential to achieving all of the goals we listed.

The goals listed under Connection, Ministry, Maturational and Incarnational Growth, and Transforming the World are largely individual; therefore, significant change can be achieved with a program that involves a small percentage of the congregation. And, in fact, more dramatic individual results might be achieved in the areas of Maturational and Incarnational Growth and Transforming the World with a program that is limited in size.

If the goals under the heading Ministry are important to your church, then training and support of your facilitators and leadership from your professional ministry is critical. This is shared ministry and that is most evident when your minister is working with your facilitators, as supporter, trainer, coach, and visionary. If your church does not have a professional minister, then I would advise involving some part of the lay ministry, pastoral care associates, caring ministry, etc.

If the church's goal is to grow numerically, maturationally, and incarnationally, you are more likely to achieve this goal if a majority of your congregation members are currently participating in the program or have had a meaningful experience in the program in the past. To me, this means making membership available to everyone and especially newcomers. Since most of our congregations experience about 10% turnover each year, if you make participation available to newcomers, and have a healthy church and a healthy program, in about five years, it is possible that half of your congregation will be participating in the program.

Full achievement of most of the goals listed under Strengthening and Enriching the Church will also require the involvement of about half of the congregation. Some congregations are experimenting with giving more congregation members a short experience with small group ministry to give the whole congregation some understanding of this way of being in right relationship. Small churches may find it relatively easy to involve half of the congregation in a small group ministry program. However, for many of our mid-size and large churches, having half of the members involved in the program is a challenge, because of the amount and level of work involved in coordination. The most critical tasks, leadership identification, training, development, and support, are massive, intensive and continuous in a program of more than about 15 groups, and therefore the kind of work that a church often assigns to paid staff. I speak

from experience, as our program at the Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge now has 24 groups and I am an increasingly busy and challenged volunteer coordinator. Our mid-size and larger churches who want their congregations to get the full benefit from a small group ministry program may want to pay particular attention to the leadership structure for the program and explore professionalizing the role of program coordinator. In the meantime, you will likely need a dedicated and skilled volunteer coordinator and a good well-trained steering team, as well as full support and involvement from your professional ministry.

That's about all I have to say for now. However, this is just the beginning of a conversation on the goals and benefits of small group ministry programs and I would welcome your observations, comments or additions. Send them to me at Diana_dorroh@hotmail.com.