

Ministry Objectives or Goals of Small Group Ministry

by Diana Dorroh, *CGN May 2010 Wrap-up --*

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 2010 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.