

## **NORTHEAST DISTRICT SURVEY REPORT**

Editor's Note: Rev. Robert Hill

As most of you know, the current impetus for Covenant Group Ministry in the UUA began with Glenn Turner before he retired as District Minister (their term for District Executive) of the Northeast District.

Although the Rev. James Robinson had been using the technique successfully in Brewster, MA, since 1982, widespread interest in organizing churches according to Covenant Group Ministry principles in our congregations came after Glenn convinced the Rev. Calvin Dame and his Augusta, ME, church to begin small groups using an adaptation of methods now fueling the growth of many evangelical Christian churches, methods with roots that go back many hundreds of years, predating the rise of churches as we know them.

Now that district has provided us with some data on how the approach is working in their region. The Extension Committee of the Northeast District of the UUA released a report several months ago which we are finally passing on to you. Sorry for the delay. This report results from a series of interviews done by the committee members with 25 congregations in the District. Here is what they found:

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Seventeen churches (a total of 2094 members) have experience with the SGM Program. 401 individuals are currently active in a total of 59 groups. The church with the most groups is the Augusta UU Church, the pilot program with 13. 4 churches (with 419 members) were not yet active in the SGM Program, but were beginning to organize. 4 churches (with a total of 203 members) were either not interested at all (1) or just entertaining the idea (3).

In most of the churches with active SGM groups, the process began with materials from former district minister Glenn Turner or the Augusta congregation and minister Calvin Dame. Congregations felt free to adapt materials to fit the

location. In most cases, the process took 3-6 months once active planning began. Often the SGM idea had been forming for more than a year.

### SUCCESS FACTORS:

1. All groups have facilitators, usually trained by the coaching minister and/or the organizing committee. Only a small number have apprentice facilitators or co-facilitators. Most groups meet twice per month.
2. Session plans are created from the Augusta UU Church model by their own coach or group facilitators from a wealth of UU and other religions or secular resources. The plans are frequently shared among all groups in a particular church and between congregations.
3. The most successful programs occur where the minister is most interested and active in the SGM Program. Coaching sessions take place monthly in most congregations with the minister as coach.
4. The SGM Program has worked better in places where time and planning was not cut short and the backing of a number of leaders and an enthused minister was present prior to beginning the groups.

Groups are most often organized by day and time, with geographic location the second most popular criteria. Although several churches have plans to start more groups, no group has "birthed" into two. Most congregations felt it too early to say whether SGM had affected membership numbers. Most observed a change in community dynamic with comments such as: "more caring and warmth," "new connections," "help integrating new folks," "increased intimacy" and the like.

### SURVEY FINDINGS:

1. Larger "program size" churches experience SGM most helpful and enriching in establishing relationships between members and friends.
2. UU congregations below 100 initially believe they already operate in SGM mode, or have no energy for SGM. "Family size" congregations (especially below 50) are convinced of this.
3. "Special interest" small groups are less successful than general interest groups with broad age span.

4. Social service and outreach elements help each small group cohere and grow (if not in numbers, in esteem and connections).
5. Starting more groups for newcomers and newly interested folks is more successful (prevalent) than dividing groups, as in the Carl George model.
6. SGM has not yet proved to be a significant growth factor in Northeast District UU church membership.
7. A "passionate champion" for SGM in the church appears to be an important element to the successful introduction of SGM in that church.

COMMITTEE COMMENTS:

1. SGM is an initiative that requires a minimum of three years of exploration and practice in the District in order to observe its potential.
2. We encourage members of SGM to invite non-church friends to participate in SGM, as another means to introduce people to SGM, and to UUism.
3. We suggest that churches include a process to contact people who cease to participate in SGM to ask why, so that the SGM initiative might be improved.

*The Northeast District Extension Committee consists of Cheryl Ring (chair), the Rev. Judith Smith-Valley, Paul Smith-Valley, Mickey Worth, the Rev. Helen Zidowecki, and Roger Comstock (Interim District Executive).*