

Practitioners' Summit Aligns Theory, Practice Of Small Groups

Bob Hill, *Covenant Group News*, April 1, 2001

Small group ministry revitalizes congregations and ministries, but there's no use pushing the idea that Covenant Groups will split or birth new groups when they reach the magic number of 10. It just doesn't happen. That was close to being a consensus position of a Summit of Practitioners which met at our Palatine, IL, church last Friday night and all day Saturday.

The Center for Community Values (CCV) brought together six men and women, ministers and laypersons, who are highly experienced and successful in small group ministry and asked them to reflect on what they've learned. The practitioners were the Rev. Calvin Dame and Cheryl Ring of Augusta, ME; the Rev. James Robinson of Brewster, MA; the Rev. Michael McGee of Arlington, VA; the Rev. Heather Lynn Hanson of Manhasset, NY; and the Rev. Jane Bramadat of London, Ontario.

Friday night, Thandeka, CCV President and Meadville-Lombard Associate Professor of Theology and Culture, opened the discussions with an analysis of the positive changes produced by small-group gatherings, which she labeled "bio-power."

Mellen Kennedy, CCV Education Director and Lifespan RE Director at All Souls, Kansas City, presented on Saturday a way of understanding the strengths and problems of small group work from the perspectives of various interest groups.

Connie Grant, DRE at Countryside Church in Palatine and CCV Board Member, arranged the conference. Karen deVries, CCV Board member and web mistress from California, also participated, as did I as an advisor to CCV, and as did Stefanie Barley, a guest from Augusta.

The idea behind the gathering, which was funded in part by funds solicited by the Rev. Brent Smith of Fountain Street Church in Grand Rapids, MI, was to find out from six folks deeply engaged in small group ministry what most impresses them, positively or negatively, about this way of "doing church." Several presented brief papers to the group for discussion.

Although there was no surprise in the enthusiasm for and excitement about Covenant Groups which these folks expressed, we learned from them, they learned from each other, and we all left the gathering reaffirmed in our commitments to spread widely the good news of small group ministry's power to bring new life to our congregations.

The one change that I, at least, will have to make in my presentations about Covenant Groups is that I will no longer insist that any of our small groups must plan to ask some of their members to leave to help start a new group when the number of members in their group reaches 10.

None of our practitioners reported success in getting that to happen. They all agreed that when groups get larger than 10 or so (some say 8), they stop being small enough to allow for the intimacy which is a key strength of this approach. Having bonded, however, Covenant Group members don't want to send even their newest members off to start new groups, the practitioners agreed.

The need to have places for new folk, the practitioners suggested, is being handled instead by the formation of new groups with the same focus and sometimes the same meeting time as the group that has reached 10 members.

This requires, for many of our participating churches, steady recruitment and training of new facilitators. It also means that groups that reach 10 or so become temporarily closed, until attrition opens a space for someone new to join.

I will continue to recommend, however, that even those groups that have "maxed out" keep an empty chair in their circle to remind themselves of the need to offer the wonderful benefits of small group ministry to the people who need what they themselves are experiencing as Unitarian Universalists in community.

SERVICE PROJECTS ENLIVEN GROUPS

Other key point from the meeting which will get fuller treatment later included these:

-- Being the professional leader of a congregation committed to small group ministry requires changes in how ministers do their ministry, and such changes can be highly stressful. Despite the rewards, which our practitioners have found to be deeply satisfying and reinvigorating, Calvin Dame said, some ministers and some congregations are reluctant to move from their familiar patterns even as they complain their congregations are "stuck" or "plateaued."

-- Service, to the sponsoring congregation and to the larger community, is a vital and often infectious enlivening aspect of many of our small groups.

Jim Robinson in particular, who has been using these techniques in Brewster since 1982, finds that Covenant Groups and/or affinity groups in his church account for most of the social justice work of his church, which is often referred to as "the conscience of Cape Cod."

Mike McGee, who has introduced Covenant Groups to two of our larger congregations, said that, when a facilitator complains that her or his Covenant Group is getting stale, he

advises them to get the group involved in a service project. So far, that advice has produced the desired results: the group becomes lively again.

SMALL GROUP MINISTRY: HERE TO STAY

Small group ministry is still in its beginning stages in our movement, but it is now clear that this is no passing fad, no artifact of transitory conditions. Covenant Groups, by whatever name, are ways of serving, and serving remarkably better than we've ever served them before, the basic needs of our members and those who would be members.

We are in the process of revitalizing our ministry and our churches. We will continue to learn about and evolve these techniques as we go, but we already know the basics, our ministers and lay people are putting them into place, and we are on our way to great service and major accomplishments.

There are probably 40 or a 100 or more folks who might logically have been invited to this summit of practitioners if we had had the necessary funds and if we'd known what those 40 or 100 are doing with small group ministry. The six practitioners we invited this time are not the only successful and articulate spokespersons for what is happening. Maybe next time we'll have 16 or 60 practitioners meeting in various regional gatherings.

We finally know how to fulfill our mission as a liberal religion existing in a world evermore desperately in need of religious liberalism and all it entails. Finally, we are moving in the directions we've always said we wanted go while we sat and wondered how to get off dead center.

I don't know about the planets, but I see that we now have an alignment of theory and practice that is highly auspicious. What a great time it is to be us!