

QUESTIONS: SUCCESS AND EXTRA-GRACE REQUIRED

by Rev. Robert Hill

SUCCESS STORIES

As many of you may know, the Unitarian Universalist Community Church of Augusta, ME, has experienced growth for the first time in years, along with a 26% jump in Every Member Canvass results, after a couple of years of Small Group Ministry.

The church's minister, the Rev. Calvin Dame, wrote recently, "Through the newsletter and from the pulpit, by recognition and encouragement, I keep people in mind of the fact that we are all called to ministry, that the small groups have revitalized the life of the congregation, that there is always room for new participants, and that the work of the small groups is the work of the church."

By whatever name, small-group organization allows our congregations to serve the needs of members and potential members in ways we haven't been able to do before. Here's a bit of testimony from one of our smaller groups:

TWO YEARS OF COVENANT GROUPS: 30% MEMBERSHIP GAIN

"We have the most active covenant groups in the District and new groups are still being formed. Last year at this time, we had 9 registered in RE, this year we have about 14.... Two years ago we reported 50 members to the SW District, last year 57, and today we have 65 active members. So that is a net increase of 15 in two years, even though we've had transfers, people moving out of the area, and drop-outs." -- Janet Duke Gardner, President, Oak Cliff congregation, Dallas, October, 2000.

Among the Covenant Groups at Oak Cliff are these:

- The Sketch Club
- Course in Miracles Groups (daytime and evening)
- Sign Language
- Games Group
- Nature Walks Group
- The Dollar Llama Investment Group

A FREQUENTLY-ASKED QUESTION: EXTRA-GRACE-REQUIRED PEOPLE?

A lay member of one of our congregations wrote recently to ask about training facilitators to deal with difficult Covenant Group members or "extra-grace-required" people. This is a persistent worry among people contemplating small-group ministry programs, I find. This was my reply:

A. For being sure of dealing well with really difficult folk, we'll never have enough training to offer, in advance, to facilitators. Even therapy groups led by professionals can be given fits by some folks.

B. The facilitator's task is mainly to understand the Covenant Group process, lead the group in creating a covenant about how they will function with each other in the Covenant Group, and then to help the group stay on task with the ritual and the ways in which they've said they want to be together.

If a "extra-grace person" prevented the group from reaching consensus on how to be with each other, it would be the facilitator's task to note that one necessary component of a Covenant Group was not attainable and that this particular Covenant Group would, therefore, not be able to come into being.

Once the group's covenant is agreed to, though, it becomes a powerful and useful touchstone for the group and the facilitator.

C. Most training will occur in the Facilitators' Covenant Group, and it will be on-going for as long as there are Covenant Groups. That will be facilitated by the minister (or in a congregation without a minister, a carefully-chosen, well-respected member of the church with the backing of the Board).

These being extended ministry groups, the minister must assist and train facilitators, and the facilitators will learn from and teach each other. If there are "extra-grace folk" who have not been successfully melded into their Covenant Groups, they will provide opportunities for learning during the discussions in the Facilitators' CG. (Occasionally, the minister or the minister and facilitator may have to remind someone of the covenant of their group and insist that they either abide by it or leave that CG, but I expect such occasions will be rare.)

My fear is less that some Covenant Groups will fail than that we will, by trying to avoid risks, too long postpone what the Rev. Dr. Brent Smith calls "the conversion experience" of actually being a part of a Covenant Group.

Given the safety-enhancing, trust-building structure of CGs, I put a lot of faith in most any collection of 6-10 Unitarian Universalists meeting with a facilitator and being constantly reminded of our highest values (the readings). I think this should be "sold" as an experimental program, a try-it-and-see-if-you-like-it program.

A lot of people will be hooked by the community and uplift they find; others may not, but they will have lost nothing more than a few hours of time. Unless we define not continuing (or keeping everyone who comes) as failure, which we should not.

TWO "BAD" POSSIBILITIES

I envision only two "bad" things that might happen. One is that one, two, or three Covenant Groups will fail to enlist enough participants. However, we know that people will choose groups because of the focus, the meeting site, and the time/date, and perhaps for other reasons, so there is no ego loss for the potential facilitator if her or his group does not come together.

The other is that some may fold during the first few months (again, because people discovered problems with the focus, the facilitator, the meeting site, the time/date of the meeting, or something else). If that happens and the congregation is left with only one, two, or three or more Covenant Groups still going, then the church will be, still, that many groups ahead of where it was before starting the small-group focus.

The experience of our Brewster, MA, church indicates that one in three Covenant Groups will last 10 or more years. Still, I'm sure some "fail" in the first year. In the case of Covenant Groups, though, "failure" comes at little cost. The opportunity for creating community in new small groups will always be before us so long as we are open to the process.

-- Bob