

40. Service: An Essential Element of Small Group Ministry Sessions

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UU Small Group Ministry Network Quarterly, Spring 2005

In the relatively short time since Small Group Ministry/Covenant Groups began to emerge and spread through our Unitarian Universalist congregations, there has been a spirited and appropriate discussion as to what elements are essential to small group ministry, what can be considered as best practices, and what are local variations that are best left to local circumstances and taste.

In Augusta, we have included the expectation that each group engage in some form of service either within or beyond our congregation at least once a year from the very beginning. There are a number of reasons why I think service is essential. First, it was a clear element in the material from evangelical churches that we researched in putting our program together. Quite frankly, as we were surveying a model that successfully builds congregations of tens of thousands of members, it seemed like a good idea to take the elements of that model seriously.

But more than that, including service made spiritual sense. We were intent on putting together groups that would deepen the spiritual resources of our congregation by fostering the spiritual growth of our members. We opted for spiritual growth groups, and here is the bottom line on spiritual growth: service is always both a path and an outcome of spiritual growth. We didn't make this up, you can check it out in any religious tradition, teacher or path.

And we had other reasons as well. One is the powerful intimacy that develops when groups are working well, it can create a centripetal force and a self-absorption that can isolate a group. A regular connection back to the larger community seems in order.

Then, too, groups that just talk all the time, well, they just talk all the time. They get boring and stale. Groups need to get up and do something together. A movie night is good, but so is a project where members roll up their sleeves, rub elbows, get to know each other in a different way, and gain the satisfaction of making a contribution together. Our experience

in Augusta has ratified our expectations and provided lessons we didn't foresee. Service has been an important part of the experience of our small groups. Over the years, it is the groups that engage in service projects most generously and most often that have been the strongest, have lasted longest and have been the most resilient. And the various service contributions have supported and extended the mission of the larger congregation.

What kind of projects? Well, all sorts, large and small: Show up together for a work day, take all the serving/greeting tasks on a Sunday morning, run a fund raiser, show up together on clean up day, staff the soup kitchen, buy Christmas presents for a family at the Family Violence Shelter, paint a room, paint the garage, fill the flower boxes out front, raise money for our project in Nicaragua, provide a worship service, organize the reception after a memorial service.

I appreciate a big project, but small projects are great, too! Especially because it is true that some groups resist the service component. We never insist that a group do a service project, but we do encourage the group to return every few months to the Service Session Topic in our Sessions Book, and consider service in the context of spiritual growth and the life of community. And, sooner or later most groups will take on a small project. And, not surprisingly, the experience is usually good and a small project leads on to other, more ambitious contributions.

As Small Group Ministry has spread thought our movement, one of my disappointments has been that too often planners choose or congregations opt not to include service in their model. I think those programs miss an important avenue for building strong groups, and that in doing so we sell ourselves short. I believe that we need to take our own spiritual lives seriously, and that we need to be forthright about the spiritual truths we know. A deepening spiritual life is a life of service, and service is a path into spiritual community.