

## 18. Covenant Group Ministry at Large Congregations

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Beginning, growing and maintaining a Covenant Group Ministry program in a large congregation is vital to the health of a large congregation, but by no means an easy task. According to Rev. Stefan Jonasson, the Unitarian Universalist Association's Coordinator of Services for Large Congregations (550+ members), Covenant Group Ministry programs have been most successful in medium-size Unitarian Universalist congregations. In a large UU church, it is rare to have more than 25% of the members in Covenant Groups. At my congregation, First Unitarian Society of Madison (FUS), WI (1400 members as of March 2005), about 10% of our members are involved in our Chalice Groups Program, as we call it.

Since we started the program four years ago, we've noticed subtle shifts in the culture of the congregation. We are less of an anonymous group of strangers than we were four years ago, have a better understanding of what shared ministry means, and are better able to welcome new people into our congregation. Many of our new members are already members of a Chalice Group by the time they sign the book. In addition, the people who have been in a Chalice Group have a greater awareness and comfort with the idea of being in covenanted communities and with the practice of respectful listening.

Our facilitators have a greater understanding of a new (old) way of facilitating a small group that is not leading it or coaching it, but welcoming shared ownership. They are even demonstrating a greater familiarity and comfort with leading or participating in spiritual practices.

The work of beginning and running a Small Group Ministry Program may be more difficult in a large church because you need to do very careful planning before launching the program, will need to accept that this is a long-term strategy, will need resources (namely money), must have clear communication

between all the different levels of your program, and be intentional about welcoming the stranger.

Be prepared for the pre-launch stage to take more time – it took us over a year. We knew that we could not begin by starting one or two Covenant Groups, the way some small congregations do it, because in our congregation that would immediately set up the appearance of an “in” group. Instead we wanted to begin by offering ten Covenant Groups right away, enough to accommodate about 100 people. Because of this, we were compelled to get the whole structure in place first, with an administrative task force, a formal registration process, all three of our ministers enthusiastic, our Board of Trustees okay with the idea, and ten or so trained facilitators ready to begin. We had our launch in the fall of 2001 to introduce the program at our three worship services, with a reception after each service.

During the first three years of our Covenant Group Ministry program, (CGM) I sometimes heard the phrase “Is that all?” when I would explain how many Chalice Groups we had or state the total number of people involved in our program. Because Covenant Group Ministry is designed to begin rather small and grow organically, in a large congregation it requires a long-term strategy and commitment. Stefan Jonasson says that it takes three to five years or more for a program to grow enough to change the culture of a large church. That means that it will take a lot of enthusiasm, determination and patience to see it through.

We've seen some growth of our program each year, having begun with nine groups. We set up our fourth year with 15 Covenant Groups meeting once or twice a month, three groups of facilitators meeting with a coach and a minister each month, the three coaches meeting each month, and our coordinating team working to administer and steer the program. Our coordinating team consists of eight people who have one or more roles in our program. So that at our meetings, we have in the same room the

heart and brainpower of two ministers, three coaches, two co-chairs, three facilitators, one Covenant Group member, our Director of Member Programs, and one FUS member-at-large.

Why don't we have more Covenant Groups in our large churches? Stefan Jonasson remarked in a workshop that the "short answer is that we think Covenant Group Ministry should be free." At a large church, it will take resources –mainly staffing – to have a vibrant program. Stefan, who spends a lot of time visiting large Evangelical churches, says that these churches put monetary resources toward their Small Group programs. With the proper resources, there would be virtually no burnout for facilitators, coaches, administrative staff or ministers because the work would be evenly distributed. A fully staffed Covenant Group Ministry program would probably need a full-time Covenant Groups Minister, an administrator or two, and a large group of paid coaches. According to Stefan Jonasson, when a church becomes very large – 1500 members and above – it needs a large Covenant Group Ministry program (with 40% or so of the congregation involved) in order to continue to thrive and meet the spiritual and pastoral care needs of its members.

Getting the word out about Small Group Ministry is quite a challenge in a large congregation! We publicize our program in numerous ways and it's never really enough. I continually find that many people need a personal invitation that lets them know that they're welcome to join.

The other part of communication is making sure that all the different levels of our CGM program – ministers, administration, coaches and facilitators – are in agreement about how to do Covenant Group Ministry. Perhaps in a small congregation, it is easy to meet in one group, but we do not. I do recommend getting all the facilitators, coaches and ministers together as a large group at least once a year, perhaps for a training session in the fall. The rest of the year, we must be diligent about remembering to share information amongst us all, through our coordinating team and via e-mail.

Whenever I place someone in a group, I let him or her know the names of the other group members. The vast majority of the time, the new person knows no one. Sometimes, people who have been members of FUS for fifteen years or more meet each other for the first time in a Chalice Group! Some of our group members say that it is terrific to have someone to sit beside at a worship service, but this is by no means a given in a large congregation. Since we have three worship services, we may not see the members of our Covenant Groups at church. This can be upsetting to some, because they finally know nine people (rather than none) and still don't get to sit with someone they know!

Many of our groups combat this feeling of isolation by meeting twice a month rather than once. We even have a couple of groups that meet every other week, though it takes diligence to schedule meetings that way. Meeting more often helps people learn each other's names and faces faster. For me, an occasional miracle occurs at my church which brings us together: In April, I was at our Saturday worship service to do a lay reading and was overjoyed to find that five members of my Chalice Group were there! Only two of them are regular Saturday attendees – the rest just showed up because the sermon topic appealed to them. The topic? Silence.

NOTE: Another version of this article, "Covenant Group Ministry in Large Congregations Or, How to Connect with Nine People You Would Otherwise Never Meet," was published by the UUA 2006.