

## **Our Members Write About Service Project Success Stories**

*UU Small Group Ministry Network Quarterly, Spring 2005*

"I slept and dreamt that life was joy.  
I awoke and saw that life was service.  
I acted and behold service was joy."  
Rabindranath Tagore

### **First Parish UU, Kennebunk, ME**

Our Small Group Ministry Group at First Parish Unitarian Universalist church of Kennebunk, Maine, did our yearly duty, signing up for a coffee hour or two, but sought a service project that reached beyond our group, beyond our church. At the time, fall of 2003, while co-facilitating a bereavement group, I discovered Shawl Ministries. (See Janet Bristow and Victoria Galo at <http://www.shawlministry.com/> for background information.) Our Small Group Ministry began a Shawl Ministry as our service project, a way to celebrate our coming together in love, and to share our compassion and love for others through the work of our hands. Members who did not knit or crochet made beautiful tags for shawls or helped with refreshments. As we evolved, we moved the ministry to the Caring Committee, and began blessing the completed shawls in Sunday service. To date we have completed 35 shawls, involving more than 15 people. Our shawls went to people dealing with illness, grief, and care giving. They marked birthdays, weddings, friendship, and births. They went to people within our church community, outside our community and have traveled as far as Africa.

Another idea grew from a SGM Facilitators meeting discussion about service projects. We asked Our Arts and Improvements Committee to create a "Job Box". The box contains cards describing odd jobs around the church. Our SGM tackled the first entry, cleaning and polishing our library (which contains hundreds of antique volumes), during one of our regular meetings. Amazing what eight people with two hours can accomplish. I am hoping, as the SGM Coordinator at First Parish, that we can tackle a church-wide project sponsored by all of the groups. One candidate is an outdoor labyrinth we would like to create. Sally Keene, Facilitator of "Together on Tuesdays", SGM, Coordinator FPUU

### **River of Grass UU Congregation, Plantation, Florida**

I asked our covenant group leaders to submit a description of their successful service projects and here are their responses. We have organized 3 or 4 blood drives, assisted with the Holiday Angel Tree project and participated in new home clean-up days. – P. Miller

Our covenant group sponsored a "night out" for our members with children. We hosted free child-care on a Saturday night at the church facility. This enabled members to go out for the evening without the extra expense of child care, while knowing their children were being safely and lovingly cared for. – E. Garwood

Last June before our Saturday morning covenant group split, we hosted a successful End of the Church Year Brunch immediately after the last service before summer break. The group members had a really good time working as a team, and the congregation seemed to enjoy it. Members went out of their way to prepare special foods, not just bagels. We plan to do the same this year, as a combined group. – M. Gutfreind

Last summer, our now two separate Saturday morning covenant groups came together to conduct a lay lead service on what "covenant" means. We considered it to be a true service project because the Chair of the worship committee came up short on summer service topics/leaders and really needed us. – D. Lade

To assist with last year's May Madness Project (an emergency month of various fundraisers to eliminate a pending cash-flow crisis) our covenant group hosted back-to-back fundraising Bunko parties on a Friday and Saturday night. The event was so successful (\$600, I think) this year's Fun-Raising committee planned three additional Bunko parties. – L. Bresnahan Submitted by Janet C. Schwartz

## **Universalist Church of Arlington, VA**

Elizabeth Barrett, Madison, WI

I interviewed the Reverend Michael McGee of the UU Church of Arlington concerning service projects in their congregation. Arlington has about 1000 members with 25 Covenant Groups. Rev. McGee started with ten covenant groups four years ago, and was a little reluctant about introducing the service project component of covenant group ministry to his congregation. He wasn't sure how the idea would be received.

Nonetheless, he "put it out there," introducing service as one of three purposes of covenant group ministry: to create community, foster spiritual growth and serve others. He encountered little resistance to his expectation that each group do one service project per year, either for the community or for the church. Even now, almost every covenant group follows through on this expectation.

Whenever Rev. McGee encounters a "stalled" covenant group, he encourages them to work on a service project because of the renewed energy and sense of purpose service brings to a group. At his church, groups have helped the community in various ways, including volunteering at a food bank and cooking and serving meals to the homeless. In addition, covenant groups have taken over the implementation of many projects that directly benefit the Arlington Church, including the building of a playground, coordinating the end-of-the-year potluck for all covenant group members, hosting new member potlucks and the annual breakfast for all religious education teachers.

## **The Action-Reflection Model**

Elizabeth Barrett & David Blough, First

Unitarian Society, Madison, WI

We at First Unitarian Society of Madison encourage each Covenant Group to do at least one service project per year, either for our church or the larger community. We foster intentionality and growth through service by using the Action-Reflection model.

For many of us, our lives are a continuous cycle of action without reflection. The danger of this habit is "spiritual drift." Over time, our decisions and actions may become disconnected from what we truly value and hope to accomplish. We may find ourselves acting without thinking, or feeling like our actions are not having any effect.

Covenant Groups are a way for us to reflect on what we have done, integrate it with our values and our understanding of the world, and make that the basis of future action. This approach of action, reflection, and integration transforms service from a task in our too-busy lives into a means of spiritual fulfillment. Service becomes renewing, not draining.

A feeling of renewal comes in working with others for a common goal and from knowing that our actions are related to something we really care about. Reflect on what we have accomplished gives us a chance to appreciate the difference we have made.

While it's true that participating in a service project brings its own satisfaction, people can become burned out if its meaning isn't reflected on. Focus on the connection between the work and its broader effects, either during the project or afterwards.

Here are a few questions for reflection on the experience of service: What did engaging in service feel like? What parts felt energizing and what parts, if any, felt like obligation? What did you learn about yourself and others by doing this service? What did you notice about the experience of working together toward a common goal? In what ways is service part of your Unitarian Universalist faith? What changes, if any, would you like to make in your own actions or habits as a result of doing the service.