

Small Group Ministry In the Small Congregation

Rev. Jane Dwinell, Montpelier, VT

From the April 2005 *Small Talk*, printed in the *Small Group Network Quarterly, Summer/GA 2006* and part of “Religious Exploration for Adults” in *Big Ideas for Small Congregations*, Jane Dwinell and Ellen Germann-Melosh, Montpelier, VT: Spirit of Life Publishing, 2007

Over and over, people say the reason they love their small congregation is because of the intimacy it provides. Sometimes people say, “We don’t need a Small Group Ministry program... we’re already a small group!”

But a **Small Group Ministry program is different than being a small group. It is an intentional way to deepen spiritually, and to really get to know a group of people.** It is a simple way to become intimate and honest with one another, and to learn to care for one another in times of joy and in times of need – something that doesn’t always happen at Social Hour.

In a small congregation, we have more opportunities to get to know each other in informal ways. Social Hour is not crowded, and we can walk up to anyone and start a conversation. But how deep can we go? There’s probably only time to chat a little about the sermon, or the music, or the weather, or the yummy cake being served. **At Social Hour, there isn’t the time, or the atmosphere, to really sit down and have a deep, and safe conversation.** Perhaps the sermon triggered feelings of loss, or feelings of fear. Can you imagine sharing that over a cup of coffee in the fellowship hall while small children are buzzing around, and people are soliciting volunteers for the next fundraiser? Can you imagine being moved to question different aspects of your life, and then share it with someone at the back of the sanctuary or on the front lawn?

Small Group Ministry groups provide safety, and a quiet time set aside specifically for deep and intimate sharing. Small Groups meet somewhere that feels comfortable to their members. They meet for a specific period of time, with a specific covenant, at specific intervals of time. The structure is such to allow people to be ready to open up, listen, learn, and share. And with that basis of intimacy and trust developed in

the Small Group, the rest of congregational life becomes more fun and vital. Small Group members are more likely to come to worship – to see the members of their group. Small Group members are more likely to volunteer for church projects and church leadership positions – they are grateful to their congregation for the Small Group experience and want to give back.

You may think that having a Small Group Ministry program will just add another layer of work onto an already burdened small congregation. **On the contrary, it gives people more energy – and a greater reason – to participate, and work to help their congregation grow and flourish.** I have heard over and over again that Small Group Ministry has brought a greater sense of spiritual depth, commitment, understanding, and caring to the individual participant – and to the congregation. It is here that we can possibly best live out our Third Principle, “Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.”

Every congregation that has a Small Group Ministry program needs to have at least two groups, even if there are only 3 or 4 in each group. It’s better to spread the energy around, and by having more than one group, you can offer them at different times (a day group and an evening group, for example) or in different geographic locations in the area your congregation serves.

Group format and process, and training and support for Group leaders is done the same in any size congregation. **If you don’t have a minister to help train and support the leaders, they can support each other, or find help from another congregation nearby.** Look to your District Staff, or the Small Group Ministry Network, for help with lesson plans, and leader training.

Small Group Ministry is perfect for the small congregation as a way to increase intimacy and commitment, and bring new people into our faith!