

Together for Good: Small Group Ministries in the Large Congregation

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“There came a time when the risk to remain tight in the bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom.” -- Anaïs Nin

When I moved from a ministry with a small congregation to my current work with First Unitarian Society of Madison, Wisconsin, I was surprised at how different the nature of my work became. The average size of a UU congregation is about 150 members, so programming tends to be aimed at the assumptions and dynamics of smaller groups. Adapting programs like Covenant Group Ministry to a large congregation is therefore not always as simple as we'd expect.

But this work of reshaping Covenant Groups to the needs of a large congregation is very much worth it. Of the ministry I've done here in the last four years, there's nothing I credit more for growing the health of this congregation and multiplying my effectiveness as a minister. The intentionality and principles of Covenant Groups are just what the large congregation needs to move beyond the barriers keeping us from deeper community and broader vision.

The attitudes that prevent many small congregations from growing are surprisingly also an issue in the largest congregations -- indeed, these just seem to be part of the human condition in community. Even with 1,400 members, I still occasionally hear “but I'm afraid I won't know everyone if we grow any larger.” I recognize that part of what they really mean is “I'm afraid I won't *be known* if we grow.” It's easy for members to feel that they'll no longer matter to others there, that being one of many will mean that they're insignificant. But what better way to recognize their inherent worth and dignity than through the deep listening and authentic relationships of a Covenant Group? In the five years that First Unitarian has enjoyed our small group ministries, it's palpable how much healthier the web of our relationships has become; from my

perspective, it has significantly relieved our fear of continued growth.

Too many Unitarian Universalists conceptualize life in our congregations primarily in terms of individual satisfaction at the expense of the community's health. I don't think that there exists another mainstream religious movement that has so deeply institutionalized the attribute of selfishness. However, as more of our members have their most powerful moments in a Covenant Group as well as in worship services or adult education courses, it is community that they come to us for, rather than personal contentment. Truly, small group ministry is helping our members to see themselves as much more than self-interested individuals; they are reminded of how powerful and transformative it is to be together in covenanted community.

Lastly, it is easy for membership in a large UU congregation to be marked by directionless drifting from activity to activity, with no sense of an integrated spiritual journey. Because large congregations by necessity must function as multi-celled organisms in a way that small congregations do not, it's even easier for large church membership to be a disjointed experience, engaging in whatever strikes us as appealing in the moment. The Covenant Group commitment to consistent attendance, respect, deepening relationship, and our explicitly shared values, however, helps integrate our members' pursuits into a journey of clearer direction and purpose.

Because the programming of large congregations does not serve precisely the same functions as in smaller ones, there are some particular observations and recommendations I'd like to make.

Commit to intentionality. In communities that have a large UU congregation, there is usually at least one other small congregation, so we can assume that people choose to be at the larger one for good reasons. Rather than seeking the natural intimacy and informality that are common in smaller groups, I

find that some members of large congregations are actually there because they prefer anonymity and invisibility. Therefore, we may need to put extra effort into demonstrating the benefits of deeper connection. And don't forget that this communication doesn't happen by word-of-mouth as extensively as in small congregations, so it will take constant effort to keep Covenant Groups on our members' radar screens.

Extend a special invitation to new members. Help your newest members get involved with Covenant Groups before they become accustomed to invisibility and low expectations. I always make sure that our new member classes get a special testimonial from me and printed information about our small group opportunities. This potential web of relationships will also help them through the second-and-third-year slump during which many UUs drift away.

Don't sacrifice quality. Members of large congregations expect excellence -- they will not generally be patient with careless program management. It's easy to let expectations slide when there are more groups to keep track of, so be extra-intentional about qualified, committed facilitators and their training, upholding our group covenants, and maintaining member accountability. There will likely be other kinds of groups trying to ride the coattails of your successful Covenant Group ministry, but be vigilant about what it means to be a Covenant Group. Our congregations can always benefit from a diversity of small groups, so encourage these other groups to be the best book group, support group, etc. that they can be!

Plan for growth. The management of a large Covenant Group program is no small task, but it's important that we structure our programs for growth, rather than maintenance. Train more facilitators than you can currently use, and make sure that you have enough facilitators' groups so that there's room to grow. This often means a real investment in the strength of your coordinating team and in well-chosen and well-trained coaches; as we grow larger, there are limits to how much direct involvement your minister or staff member can have. Seek out strong, healthy leaders to help run your program, and help them get what they need to

make time for this important work. There are few places in the large congregation where their efforts will be more far-reaching.

I'm so grateful for all that Covenant Group ministry has done for our large congregation, and I hope that your congregation will benefit from intentionality, commitment and community as we have!