

## Using Small Group Ministry in the Metro Atlanta Spiritual Retreat

Rev. Marti Keller, Decatur, GA

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**Unitarian Universalist ministers from the Metro Atlanta area held their first ever spiritual retreat this spring, an opportunity for clergy and lay members to rest, relax, and reflect together.** The weekend getaway, held at a nearby Ignatious Catholic Center, was built around sharing favorite spiritual practices. Designed into each day were opportunities for different styles of worship, including a Friday night Sabbath service, complete with blessing the wine and the challah bread. There were also times for trying out yoga exercises, Zen Buddhist meditation, praying through collage pictures, singing and chanting, and devotional reading.

I chose to share my abiding love for and commitment to small groups as a key spiritual practice, based on over a decade of my own participation in and leadership of covenant groups within and outside of UU congregations. **My colleagues in the Metro Atlanta UU Clergy Cluster enthusiastically agreed to incorporate small groups into the daily schedule of the retreat and to act as facilitators.** We offered three time slots for meeting in groups, the initial Friday evening gathering devoted to establishing three "agreements" or behavioral covenant; asking participants what they gave up to attend the retreat; and asking that they briefly share the spiritual question they had been asked to bring into the weekend.

For the two other Small Group segments, I selected two sessions from the Small Group Ministry Session Book developed by Reverend Calvin O. Dame and the Community UU Church of Augusta, Maine. **One was on spiritual longing and the other on spiritual practices as part of individual development.**

While all activities at the retreat were optional, most of the attendees chose to participate in the small groups. **Overall, both the participants and facilitators felt that they benefited from the experience,** whether they participated in small group ministry programs in

their home congregation or if this was their first exposure.

**The Small Group experience gave each person a chance to voice questions of deep personal significance that he or she had not asked before, observed Rev. Dr. Paula Gable,** associate minister for the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Atlanta. Paula attended last summer's Ferry Beach Small Group Ministry Conference and was one of the facilitators for the Atlanta spiritual retreat groups. Paula reports that "Once the questions took shape, the answers began to emerge within these circles of trust and caring. Some of the questions posed included 'What is the meaning of life and how do I live it?' 'Are life events a matter of random chance or cosmic order?' 'How do I find God/Truth/Meaning while struggling with the crushing demands of a full-time job and child-rearing?'"

**The response to the experience of these very quickly formed and short-lived groups was mostly positive.** At the same time, some individuals felt like it was too temporary a gathering to do any meaningful spiritual work and commenting that they were unclear how much disclosure was appropriate and/or how much feedback was desirable. Others told us that the little over an hour set aside for each session was too brief. **Facilitators agreed that it may have been more helpful to have established the ground rules before the weekend began, with confidentiality and nonjudging being key " Although we did not come up with definite answers to any of these questions we posed, Paula noted, " we did find ways to live within the tension between the certain and the uncertain. And, we all agreed that we felt supported in our shared spiritual quest as Unitarian Universalists."**