

Revitalize Your Congregation's Social Action Program With Small Group Ministry!

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This may seem at first like a contradiction, but I believe that a vital Small Group Ministry program that helps members strengthen their connections to one another and deepen their own spiritual lives, can also help to energize a congregation's social action program that connects members to the larger community and world through witness and service.

This happens in several ways.

First, the essential elements of covenant group ministry, as outlined by Rev. Bob Hill (in his book, "The Complete Guide to Small Group Ministry") and as recommended by the UU Small Group Ministry Network, always includes an expectation of service to the congregation and/or the larger community. While within the groups connections among members are strengthened and avenues for a deeper spiritual life are opened up through sharing and the exploration of topics, at the same time the service component regularly connects groups beyond their own circle. This provides a reminder that a life of faith is a life of service. When a small group ministry program includes a covenant with an expectation of service, it provides a powerful modeling that our lives in religious community are not just for our own renewal, but require of us an engagement with the world.

Then, it is important to understand that people come to our congregations for many reasons. People come seeking intimacy and spiritual growth, they come hoping to find the warmth of community and they come hoping for a place where they can explore questions of faith. And people come hoping for a way to live out their faith, hoping to be able to make a contribution and to witness and work for justice. But at the same time, we also come seeking wholeness. People come to our congregations tired, hurt, lonely, discouraged, dispirited, and hungry for renewal, hungry for the gifts of the spirit. As we are able to meet these needs: to feed one another, to encourage healing, to foster connection, to provide for the renewal of the spirit, then do we find that we are able to reach out generously, to engage and to serve the world beyond the walls of our buildings.

In the years since we adapted and adopted Small

Group Ministry in Augusta, our congregation was energized in a number of ways, and our social justice efforts expanded in a fashion that I could not have imagined before. Not that we wouldn't have wanted to be more active, but we never seemed to have enough energy to sustain projects. Following 9/11, we adopted an Afghan refugee family in collaboration with the local Lutheran congregation. And in the years since we have created an ongoing project in Nicaragua called NICA, or Neighbors in Central America. We send medical and construction teams twice a year, of congregation and community members, and recently welcomed a team from another Maine congregation. It is a great project, involving everyone from Religious Education classes collecting pencils and reading glasses to seniors signing up for the trip. Is it perfect? No, but we have learned a lot about ourselves and our privileged place in the world and have helped people in real ways.

I think if you were to ask anyone who has lived through the changes in this congregation, they would join me in this assertion. It has been the richness and challenge of our Small Group Ministry that has fed the generosity and has helped us to imagine new possibilities for ourselves and to sustain a deeper and wider social engagement.

Suggestions for Encouraging Social Action in Your Small Group Ministry Program

Celebrate the service projects of your small groups! In Augusta we've had people join groups because of the spirited applause and laughter as groups were recognized and thanked on a Sunday morning. Actual quote: "I saw all these people laughing together and having fun and I wanted some of that!"

Create sessions that engage people in issues of justice and social concerns. These might address specific initiatives in the life of a congregation or they could explore questions of faith, service, ethics and justice.

Form affinity groups that have a social justice project as their focus. Often in our

congregational efforts, people just run out of steam or grow discouraged at the intractable nature of social problems. But in a group formed to address say, racism or the environment, members can take the time to explore their own experiences and conflicts, can look for and try out short and long term projects, and can create and maintain relationships that can sustain their efforts through successes and disappointments.