

Integrating Service Projects Into An Existing Program: A Success Story

Betsy Tabor and Lauren Katz, Unitarian Universalist Church of Portsmouth, NH

UU Small Group Ministry Network Quarterly, Spring 2007

The small group ministry program at South Church has had a wonderful fourth year. We started strong with Kick-Off Sunday in September: the “pump was primed” with references to covenant groups as well as a testimonial during the service and we had sign-ups afterward during the social hour. New folks volunteered on the steering committee, joining with experts from the past years.

A new minister came upon the scene with new energy, new people signed up, and new groups were formed. We have nine in all now. Just when we thought we really had the hang of it, our minister, Rev. Roberta Finkelstein, announced that each group needed to participate in a group service activity. She said that doing a community service project together was an important element in the small group ministry experience. Oh no! There was a feather missing from our cap. The Covenant Group Ministry Committee decided to introduce the concept gently, suggesting that groups consider hosting a Sunday social hour. Some groups were uncomfortable and even fretted over that. But we pushed ahead. By now we were experimenting with convener meetings, which was new to our program. We brought conveners together every couple of months, and one of our agenda items was to explore the benefits of service or social action as a small

group. As further support, we added a session plan this winter on service.

The grumblings changed to rumblings! To our surprise, covenant groups were becoming powerful vehicles for service. Brainstorming ways to move beyond cookies and coffee, one group added a twist to the social hour with an ice-breaker game to encourage people to break out of their comfort zones and make new friends. Several groups who had already hosted a social hour began thinking of doing a second activity. One group collected personal care items, toys and luggage for our local Interfaith Hospitality Network, which provides housing for homeless families. Another group volunteered their time for our annual auction, which proved to be a great financial success for the church. Groups were no longer worried about having to do a service activity. Instead, they were having trouble deciding how many to do and how to pick a day when everyone could attend!

What our committee thought would take two or more years to incorporate into the program has become a success story for community service through small group ministry. We are delighted that social service projects are now a key ingredient to each group’s connection and strength.