

Reflections On Maturing Small Group Ministry Programs

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Covenant Group/Small Group Ministry programs have developed in Unitarian Universalist congregations in a variety of forms. Some are modest, involving a few groups that foster connection and spiritual exploration for a limited number of participants, existing at the margin of congregational life, much like a respectable adult education offering. Other programs are more ambitious; involve a substantial number of adult members; consciously coordinate the lay and professional ministry of the congregation; and are intentionally organized to further the mission and vision of the congregation. Covenant groups almost invariably deepen connections and contribute to the life of the congregation. And the wider the vision with which they begin, the richer that impact may be.

Small group ministry has rapidly spread throughout our movement over the last few years because it so well serves the needs for intimacy and spiritual growth that bring people through our doors. But even good programs, well-conceived, enthusiastically begun and diligently supported, can begin to lose vitality over time. The level of participation can decline, it can become more difficult to recruit facilitators, some of the best leaders move on to new challenges. What gives?

Well, I think some decline in the level of initial enthusiasm is inevitable; otherwise, obviously, it wouldn't be initial enthusiasm. But I also believe that the leaders of a congregation can thoughtfully guide a program from an exciting introductory phase to a healthy maturity. Here is the advice I have to share.

Begin Well

There is now a wealth of material and resources available online and through the Small Group Ministry Network (www.smallgroupministry.net) on setting up an effective and healthy Small Group Ministry Program. I urge congregations to take the time to understand the dynamics and potential of Covenant Groups before beginning and then to launch them intelligently.

Don't Cut Corners

What experience has shown is that the programs that thrive are the programs that embrace the largest vision of small group ministry. Facilitators must meet for training

and support, programs that maintain a service component tend to stay fresh and vigorous, groups that are open to new members or regularly reform are regularly refreshed!

Commit Resources

In many congregations the Small Group Ministry or Covenant Groups may be the largest program after Sunday Worship and Religious Education. More adults may participate in small groups than in any other fashion in the life of the congregation, and yet few resources are committed to sustaining the program. The first, key resource is the resource of time. Healthy small groups require both ministerial and lay leadership. A congregation needs to support a minister's involvement and to invest able lay leadership as well. And, sustaining programming takes money! To sustain a level of enthusiasm, invest in training: bring in a speaker, send folks to a regional workshop, create a regional workshop for your area! People leave regional workshops fired up and equipped to make their programs the best!

Renew Your Vision

Small Group Ministry holds great promise, it is a challenging vision of who are and what we might become as religious communities. And it is a vision that needs to be restated regularly, both for those who are new to the congregation, and as a reminder for those who have come to take it for granted. Too many congregations introduce programs with great fanfare, and then allow the program and the vision to recede from

sight. Small Group Ministry is a tool by which congregations may help their members to deepen their own spiritual lives, welcome the stranger, to knit the tapestry of community and to strengthen the ministry and service of the church. Small Group Ministry can help us to grow into the congregations that we dream of being!