

Small Group Ministry Magic for Ministers

Rev. Dena McPhetres, Laconia, NH

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It was at Convo in Birmingham (the periodic gathering of Unitarian Universalist ministers) that I first experienced small group ministry instead of just resonating with the idea. I was a small group that had consistent attendance, genuine participation, and effective facilitation. One could call it a minor miracle, I suppose, that religious educators, parish ministers, chaplains, newly fellowshiped and retired colleagues could sit together, drink deep from the well of trust and mutual respect, and listen and speak truth in love.

It gave me a taste of what I wanted to experience with my colleagues at chapter meetings. I went home inspired and waited for my chance to work a minor miracle. It's a well-kept secret that our colleague meetings often don't serve our deepest needs and longings as ministers. Maybe, I thought, small group ministry could do something about that.

The missing ingredients in my chapter seemed to be: a safe environment, an activity that was nourishing to our spirits and our ministries, and a small enough group that intimacy and ultimacy could be glimpsed on a regular basis.

The chance for a minor miracle didn't open up for me until our chapter made the bold move to stop meeting as a large group each month. We broke up the family--we broke up the larger circle into geographically located smaller circles. (Anyone who has grown a congregation from family to pastoral size knows what an accomplishment this is!) Each cluster had a convener and was on its own to create a covenant and mutually agreed upon format for their meetings.

The clusters that are still alive in our district have this in common: a regular meeting date, time and location, a convener, and colleagues who make attendance at cluster meeting a priority in their lives. The format of the clusters includes some combination of worship, check-in, consultation and food. For most of us, this is enough. But not for me, for I had drunk at the well of small group ministry in Birmingham.

Several years ago, our District Executive put the magic wand in my hand when she asked

me to be convener of the cluster meeting nearest me, conveniently located at the church I serve. Like any newer minister, I waved the magic wand immediately, asking my cluster if they'd like to try small group ministry. They declined. The next year, I waved the magic wand again, to no avail. The third year, I volunteered to lead our first meeting of the fall and facilitated a small group ministry experience. Ever since, we have been passing the magic wand around the circle, taking turns facilitating small group ministry, and the minor miracle continues its revelation amongst us.

We are a cluster of eight colleagues who look forward to being together once a month, who will cancel something else to be there, who have shared our fears, doubts, joys and sorrows for the last two and a half years on a level I have rarely before experienced with colleagues. We bring our own lunch, we bring our own coffee, we know we are using time that could be spent on sermon preparation or pastoral visits and we still want to be there. Why does it work?

I have my own ideas, but in preparation for this article, I asked my cluster why they thought it worked. They said small group ministry is a straightforward way to speak of deeper things. They said they get to receive and have an experience that they are usually busy providing for others. They said small group ministry is the best way to create a safe place to share, to trust each other and to build the bonds that sustain. The continuity of our group is comforting, and the questions and reflections that we share have helped us get to know each other better and more swiftly than any other format we had tried previously.

On the practical level, we rotate facilitation of the small group ministry experience. The facilitator for the month creates a brief worship time, encourages deep listening (i.e. no interruption) during check-in, and guides us in reflection and sharing on a topic with a few juicy, provocative or profound questions. We usually don't know the topic ahead of time, and that's fine, since it might need to change at the last minute. We meet for three hours, with the last hour

devoted to general frivolity over lunch with ample opportunity for consultation about ministry challenges currently facing us.

On another practical level, when we have shared so trustingly and deeply with our colleagues over time, it makes it so much easier to pick up the phone and ask for help when we're in trouble. It is so much more likely that we will make that phone call before we're in trouble, which of course, is even better, and makes my job as Good Offices person so much easier.

It felt like a minor miracle when I first experienced it, but now that my local cluster of UU ministers has adopted a small group ministry format for our monthly meetings, I have come to count on this experience as normal. I have put my magic wand away, because I can trust my colleagues to make their own magic now.

51. Small Group Ministry at Interweave Convo 2007

Rev. Jonalu Johnstone, President, Interweave Continental

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How do you encourage and support deep connection among folks who come together for a weekend and may never see each other again? How do you draw newcomers into an established group that has met year after year? In short, how can you make a weekend workshop or conference better?

With small groups, of course.

For the last twenty-five years, Interweave Continental has held an annual Convo (short for "Convocation"), inviting UU's from all over the continent to come together to consider issues of concern for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people. This year, as we reached out to bring in more young people, we added small groups to our schedule as a way to build connections and give attendees the chance to process their experiences. In this experiment, we were following General Assembly and some other groups I've participated in, including Small Church Conferences and Ministers' Retreats in the Southwest District.

The process was designed to deepen people's experience, to increase their connection

with others, and to allow them an opportunity to process what they learned. Because we wanted to create a mix, especially across age groups, we randomized the groups, using colored dots on nametags. This meant that people were not in groups with the friends or partners they arrived with. Instead, they had to meet new people. Another way to group people, of course, is to assign them in advance. That's the strategy we use at Ministers' Retreats, creating groups whose members have a mix of time in ministry, type of ministry, and cluster.

For Convo's small groups, board members served as our facilitators. Their job was to keep things moving, to watch to make sure everyone got an opportunity to talk and to listen, and to generally monitor the functioning of the group. I provided them with session plans, including opening and closing words, check-in suggestions and discussion questions. Ideally, facilitators should meet for an hour beforehand to discuss the plans and how to relate in the groups, and once during the weekend, perhaps over a meal, to process how the groups are going.

Groups had three meetings - an hour on Friday evening, a half hour on Saturday morning after a keynote speaker and workshop, and an hour late Saturday afternoon before dinner. In the first session, people introduced themselves and got to say something positive about what was happening on queer issues in their congregations, as well as talked about their hopes and concerns for the conference. The second session allowed reflection on a highlight of the morning, and questions about making Interweave more inclusive particularly of various age groups - a major theme for the weekend. The final session provided a time to reflect on the overall experience and how people would bring their learnings back to their congregations.

Participants wanted more! Next year, we may plan for an additional group Sunday morning, and perhaps more time on Saturday morning. Many folks reported that small groups were the highlight of their weekend, even though they loved the other parts, too! On top of that, people went home with new friends they hope to see again next year.