

Small Group Ministry at Interweave Convo 2007
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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.