

A Good Blend:
A Theme of the Month for Sunday Worship and SGM
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At the First Unitarian Universalist Society of Burlington, where I serve as affiliate minister, **we decided in the fall of 2006 to have a theme of the month for our worship services and to give our Small Group Ministry groups the option of exploring this same theme.** The themes have been varied included: beloved community, fear, food, death, happiness, God, hope and change. Suggestions for themes come from the SGM Steering Committee and from congregational members in general. Several months ahead the senior minister, Rev. Gary Kowalski, and myself decide on the theme for each month. Then a month in advance **a member of the Small Group Ministry Steering Committee volunteers to develop an SGM session on that theme. The session is distributed to the groups which have the option to use it or not as they choose.** Most groups do choose to use the session.

This approach of linking the sermon and SGM theme has been a great success. The group members enjoy the link not just with the Sunday service but also with members of other SGM groups who are most likely exploring the same theme. **Overall, it has been a unifying force in the congregation.**

And for me personally it has been very rewarding. **Having been raised on a Liturgical Calendar, at first I missed not having a lectionary in Unitarian Universalism.** The lectionary always provided readings appropriate to the season, whether it be Advent, Lent or Ordinary Time. Fellow congregants came together in their reflections and celebration of joyful, sorrowful, and glorious mysteries. It was like the connective tissue of our spiritual lives.

This is why I took to the idea of connecting the sermon topic to the Small Group theme for the month – like a duck to water. It even gave a kind of buoyancy to sermon preparation. Insights that emerged within our Small Group found their way into my sermons -- organic insights that came out of the shared life experience of our members. For a minister the connection between a sermon topic and Small Group is like spreading a wider net beyond one's own experience and the usual research that goes into Sunday sermons.

This is not to say that there hasn't been some resistance. UUs are not known for conformity, some you might say are happier wading along the shore than getting into the water. Those who would prefer not to have a prescribed theme say "people's souls" are the subject in Small Group Ministry. I believe one is not exclusive of the other. Ultimately we are privileged to hear what is happening in each other's souls as we sit in the circle. **At the same time some souls take to the structure of a theme, it provides a kind of springboard to getting into the water, the revelation of our own experience.**

For me participating in Small Group Ministry is a spiritual exercise, one that keeps me healthy and energized. It's a time for me to process the meaning of my experience, grow in self knowledge, and best of all to be enriched by a deeper understanding and appreciation of the beauty and goodness of those with whom I share community. **And for our congregation, having a theme of the month has strengthened and deepened our Small Group Ministry experience.**
