

SMALL GROUP MINISTRY AND LIFESPAN FAITH DEVELOPMENT

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If a sense of community is essential for adults in a congregation, and ~f we hope that our children will be active Unitarian Universalists, Small Group Ministry is an essential part of "raising up" our children and can transform the educational ministry of the church! The result is relational religious education for all ages.

In educational programs, we give tools for the spiritual journey, such as information, traditions, and spiritual practices. However, it is in expressing and sharing spiritual journeys that we integrate the learning. Small Group Ministry connects people as a ministry that enhances spiritual journeys and church connections throughout a lifetime!

In using Small Group Ministry in Lifespan Faith Development, the focus is on spiritual development rather than gaining information, and how participants *relate to stories* rather than on how much they learn. The language used in changes from an instructional model to a community, connection, and relational model -- Relational Religious Education. The emphasis changes from religion education to an educational ministry.

The leader's *focus* is the group rather than the content. This is part of the ministry and the essence of bringing a topic alive. The leader can go deeper with a topic, with more engagement.

There is *greater latitude in grouping participants* in religious education. We tend to group participants by age. However, groups that span several years allow for variations in maturation and development of participants, more latitude in arriving at gender balance, and wisdom is shared over several years. The model can be used with very small groups, small congregations and families, and even in one-on-one mentoring situations.

Arts, crafts and activities enhance the dialogue rather than illustrate the learning. Using activities allows various methods of expression and reaction. The outcome is increased interaction rather than a product related to the information.

Myths and wisdom stories become a major methodology. Understanding of the importance of mythology in our tradition provides clues to the values of our elders. And stories also come from the participants themselves.

The concepts underlying Small Group Ministry can make the educational ministry of the church more relational, even if the content of the curricula does not change. Change in terminology sets the stage. Consider these suggestions:

- *from class to group;
- *from lesson to session or a time together;
- *from Sunday School to Religious Education;
- *educational ministry, or religious exploration;
- * from teacher to leader, facilitator, or co-discoverer -- leaders setting the stage for the session, providing resources and structure, but are not responsible for the learning itself and also learning in the process;
- * from preparing a lesson that is to be followed or something that is to be accomplished to preparing for a session, or time together -- asking teachers to reflect on the meaning of the theme for them as a primary part of preparation.

Small Group Ministry concepts can be applied in teacher and religious education committee development. Focusing on reflection and dialog encourages participants to "go

deeper" as they implement the religious education. Discussion of how Small Group Ministry can be used with children and youth, with Religious Education Committees, and in teacher development is evolving. It is found in the UUA Renaissance Model for Teacher Development (continuing education program for those involved in religious education), and in the Canadian Unitarian Council workshop, "Smaller Congregations as Lifespan Learning Communities, developed in 2008.

A detailed description for implementing Small Group Ministry in Lifespan Faith Development for

*1) children,

*2) youth, and

*3) adults working with Lifespan Religious Education

is on the website www.hzmre.com. This includes the basic elements of small group ministry, components of the session plan, and facilitation for each of these groups. There are also small group ministry sessions.

RESOURCES

CHILDREN

Adapting Small Group Ministry for Children's Religious Education: An Implementation Plan, Gail Forsyth-Vail, DRE, North Parish, Unitarian Universalist, North Andover, MA 01845. <http://www.northparish.org/gailsbook.htm>

Volume 1 has 31 session plans, and

Volume 2 (2006) has 27 additional session plans.

Also see Using A Small Group Ministry Model at

YOUTH

Small Group Ministry for Youth, June 2005, Helen Zidowecki, Small Group Ministry Network,

www.smallgroupministry.net

YOUNG ADULTS

Covenant Group Series, UUA Young Adult and Campus Ministry. Available on the UUA website.

Young Adult & Campus Ministry Covenant Group Manual, Robert Cavanaugh and Michael Tino, April 2003

Volume 1: Unitarian Universalist Identity, Kate Tweedie Erslev, June 2003

Volume 2. Finding Your Path, Michel Tino, June 2004

PARENTS

Unitarian Universalist Principles and Parenting,

Helen Zidowecki, on line at

<http://www.hzmre.com/Uuppsgml>

