

Editor's Note: Rev. Bob Hill

The Rev. Calvin Dame of Augusta, ME, and the Rev. Mark Christian of Las Cruces, NM, joined me and Glenn Turner as panelists for a GA workshop in Salt Lake City last month. A hundred or so folk packed the room and, as one observer commented later, "there was electricity in the air." Several people in the audience stood to describe small-group ministries in their congregations, and every one of them was excited about the results they've seen.

Calvin Dame talked about how negative he had been in the beginning, when Glenn raised the idea of small groups for his church. And then he contrasted that doubtfulness with his new, experience-based enthusiasm. Here is a report Calvin wrote for CGNews. (FYI: The last Unitarian Universalist Association Directory shows 161 members in this church.)

SEEKING INTIMACY AND SPIRITUAL GROWTH

By the Rev. Calvin O. Dame, Unitarian Universalist Community Church, Augusta, Maine

Last October, Glenn Turner, the Northeast District Minister, spoke at our first annual All Church Retreat, and presented the Meta-Church Material to us. I was skeptical that people would come out for church-related meetings more often, but there was considerable excitement generated, and an Ad Hoc Committee was formed to explore the idea.

Glenn made several crucial points and raised a great question. To a congregation which has been ambivalent about growth and fearful of growth he asked, **"How many Unitarian Universalists, who share our values and work on the issues that are vital to us, would it be good to have in the Augusta area?"**

And he observed, "People walk in our doors seeking intimacy and spiritual growth, and we give them committee work and Sunday morning worship. Neither meet those needs well."

The Ad Hoc Committee met twice a month with both care and enthusiasm. We reviewed the Meta Church material, talked with other congregations and thought about what we wanted and what would make sense in our congregation. There were Board members on the committee, but we still stayed in touch with the Board in a formal manner, and we kept the congregation informed of the work of the committee through the newsletter and announcements and word of mouth.

Forty-three Out of Forty five

In March we had a gathering to explain our proposals. I thought we might have enough interest to start two or three groups for the spring, and then with some successful examples, we could make a more serious launch in the fall.

Of the forty-five people at that gathering, forty-three signed up. The groups began to meet, more people joined, and two more are gathered or are gathering. **We now have about sixty people involved and most groups plan to meet through the summer.** Some people have indicated they want to be a part of a group in the fall, and I hope we will be ready to connect new people to groups by then.

We have agreed on a format, (Reading, Sharing, Topic, Likes & Wishes, Closing) and I prepare topics onto "Sessions" following that format. I work with the facilitators, and will begin working with the assistant facilitators, as well

I have included the report which grew out of the Ad Hoc Committee's work which presented the ideas to the congregation in March. It summarizes the group process, though the groups have unfolded somewhat differently.

Differences Seen as Attractive

We debated for a long time about whether groups should be gathered around some interest, i.e., Christian, Buddhist, Gay/Lesbian. We decided to offer that alternative, but there was no significant interest in it.

Instead, we found only two sorting criteria which seemed to matter. The first was the night of the week, and the second was whether couples wanted to be in the same group or in different groups. Other than that, people wanted a chance to be with other people, and saw differences as attractive. We are talking about UUs, after all.

I have debated with myself about how tight a curriculum would be good, and I am working towards a loose-leaf binder with forty or fifty sessions on varied themes: worship, life histories, loss, simplicity, forgiveness, memory, fear, ultimate commitments, etc. Then groups can have topics cast into the appropriate formats, but can also follow their own inclinations and process to some extent.

So far, the reports back are very positive. Not every group is perfect; one or two have some personality difficulties, but we are working on them. Mostly, people are a-buzz!

I have come to deeply respect the need in our culture and our churches for a sense of intimacy and the opportunity to explore one's spiritual path. That is what these groups offer, and I have never encountered anything else in our church lives for which people would consider meeting every two weeks during the summer.

I am very curious to see how this continues. -- Calvin O. Dame

Small Group Ministry Details

A group of UUCC members, including Calvin, met regularly since last fall to decide whether Small Group Ministry was a good idea for our church. After unanimously deciding that it was, and that it could help fulfill people's needs for deeper community and spiritual growth, we had the difficult task of filling in the details.

What we came up with is listed below. We recognize that some or many of the details may change after we get some experience with Small Group Ministry. We also see a need to be flexible with the details. That said, we asked our people to give the following details a try. We had put much thought into them. There are reasons for all of them ... (and we felt sure we had) not thought of some important details.

Groups of 7-10

Groups of 7-10 people meet regularly (1 to 4 times per month) to deepen their relationships with each other and to grow spiritually. The more you can meet the better; however, we recognize that people have other commitments.

These group meetings do not replace Sunday morning worship services. The two are intended to complement one another.

Each group has a leader (facilitator) and assistant leader. Facilitator is a better term than leader since the intent of the groups is to promote active discussion and caring, not to arrive at a conclusion at the end of each meeting. It is important that all group members (not just the leaders) help with maintaining the group. The leaders meet regularly with Calvin to discuss how the groups are doing, how they can be improved, etc.

Children

The groups generally meet in members' homes, recognizing that not every member can provide a place for 7-10 people to meet. The groups are intended to promote reflective adult conversation. Each group will be best able to decide how to care for children and babies during the meetings. A couple of ideas include having individual baby sitters, or having a group member take care of children in an adjoining room.

While it is hoped that group members will be "on the front lines" of providing support to each other in times of need, the groups are not organized as therapy groups.

Groups can be formed as affinity groups, in which the members of the group will have a characteristic in common (as opposed to an interest) such as Christianity, paganism, Buddhism, parents of teenagers, parents of young children or babies, gay and lesbian, people of non-European descent, etc.

Groups can also be formed as diverse groups, in which members do not share any particular characteristic, other than being interested in meeting in a thoughtful UU environment. Couples can be in the same group or different groups.

Always Open

You do not have to be a UUCC member or attendee to be a member of one of these small groups. In fact, inviting non-members to these groups is encouraged.

A very important part of Small Group Ministry is that every group is always open to new members. This means that after groups reach 10-12 members, they need to split. The assistant leader becomes the leader of one of the two new groups.

We realize that this will be hard after being involved intimately with other people's lives and ideas. We ask you to think of this as an opportunity to build relationships with new people (and to provide new people the opportunity to develop new relationships with you). Since new group members will have different spiritual experiences and ideas, this will also provide the opportunity for more spiritual growth.

Meeting Plan

What does an individual meeting look like?

1. **About 10 minutes of greetings and getting situated.**
2. **A chalice lighting and a short reading.** (*Editor's note: Covenant Groups ordinarily draw readings from recognized Unitarian Universalist sources.*)
3. **About 45 minutes of sharing** what is going on in your life. To allow everyone an opportunity to speak, this starts with everyone speaking for up to 4 minutes, without interruption. This is then followed by 15-20 minutes of follow-up conversation. (*Editor's note: This puts an even greater than normal emphasis on the *check-in* aspect of Covenant Groups.*)
4. **A spiritual topic will be introduced by the leader.** The group then discusses this topic for about an hour. For the first several meetings, the topic will be given to the groups. Depending on how this goes, and what the groups would like to do, subjects will be given to the groups or the groups will pick their own.
5. A quick list is made of what people liked about the meeting and what they wish it could have been. Then, closing words. (*Editor's note: A check-out.*)

-- Unitarian Universalist Community Church, Augusta, Maine