

## Semester Approach Helps People Overcome Reluctance To Change Covenant Groups

Bob Hill, *Covenant Group News* September 2003

It is often true that "the devil is in the details." In Small Group Ministry, one of our churches is learning, the angel is in the process. That is, the benefits reside in the process itself, not the particular group of 10 or fewer persons who have come together to form a Covenant Group.

After attending a Small Group Ministry workshop at the 2003 General Assembly in Boston last June, Margaret Leicach of the Unitarian Society of Hartford, Connecticut (appx. 350 members), had an insight about her church's unusual approach to the scheduling of Covenant Groups. "Totally by accident, it seems," she said afterward, "we have avoided a major concern I heard expressed at the workshop: the resistance of participants to changing groups."

Leicach's enthusiasm for the Covenant Group approach began more than three years ago at the 2000 GA. "When I came back all fired up to start Small Group Ministries," Leicach wrote, "I discussed it with the Rev. Terasa Cooley, our brand-new minister at that time, and we decided to try a pilot program during the spring semester, evaluate our results, and decide whether or how to proceed."

The Hartford church's existing adult education program was built around two "semesters" of four months each, October through January and February through May. Leicach and Cooley decided to use that familiar pattern as a model for Small Group Ministry.

They decided to offer a time-limited, eight-session program spread over four months, recruited some experienced facilitators, and laid out the plan. They put out a brochure explaining Small Group Ministry and began

registering people. They expected enough people for one or two pilot groups.

### PILOT PROGRAM DREW 50

"We got about 50 people who wanted to be in the initial groups," Leicach recalls, "so we had to hustle to put together some more groups to accommodate them. Terasa and I provided some training for facilitators, using the session format I had learned at the workshop, and off we went."

A potluck dinner marked the end of the pilot sessions and most of the Covenant Group participants attended. Their reaction was "overwhelmingly positive," and the church's full-scale program began in the fall of 2001.

Although some participants in the pilot program expressed anxiety about the fact that their groups were ending, Leicach believes two factors kept that anxiety from being too great: (a) the ending of each group after four months had been planned from the beginning and (b) the last session's prepared topic addressed endings and beginnings, allowing folks to process their reactions.

Now the church has several eight-session semesters under its belt and this year they added a four-week Small Group Ministry mini-program in July, August, and September. This, Leicach says, was "to accommodate newcomers, people who don't have time during the school year, and people who can't do without their SGM fix."

The temporary nature of Covenant Groups at this church, she says, "is hardly an issue at all," adding, "At church social events, people can still connect with the ones they met in their small groups, and, often, they re-

encounter in new groups 'old friends' they have been in groups with before."

People have come to realize, Leicach believes, "that their positive SGM experience can and usually is repeated in their next group, although of course it won't be exactly the same. Even when they are a bit 'disappointed' in one particular group, they (a) let me know about it in no uncertain terms, including why, and (b) sign right back up the next time."

## ADVANTAGES

The advantages Leicach sees in this approach are:

1. It is easier to get the good facilitators to commit to eight sessions at a time, knowing they can take a break when they want or need to.
2. When a facilitator turns out to not be a good fit for Small Group Ministry, it is easier to suggest that they take a break the next semester.
3. There is "no issue whatsoever about groups becoming disengaged from the congregation - to get into a group they have to re-up each time and get assigned to a group."
4. Most interesting of all, though, is this point: "We have little or no issues about changing/ending groups or welcoming new members. It is very clear that the 'group' is as much a process as it is the particular members."

## DISADVANTAGES AND A PROBLEM

Leicach sees two disadvantages of this eight-week semester approach:

1. "It's not totally realistic to ask the groups to do community or church-related service as a group, as they are not together that long. Or maybe we

just haven't had the courage to begin to expect that. Hmmm.... "

2. "It's a heck of a lot of work. We have to recruit hosts and facilitators and launch advertising and registration twice (now three times) a year. Then we have to assign people to groups, get the information to each about the dates and location of their group, get information about membership to facilitators and hosts, etc."

One problem, Leicach notes, may not be a result of this format: "We have had difficulty getting experienced facilitators to regularly attend training and to participate in their own minister-led SGM experiences. Rather, they seem to prefer to be 'members' of their own-led groups."

## GENERAL BENEFITS

Other benefits related to Small Group Ministry in general which Leicach notes are these (in her words):

- We are finding that the process, what I refer to as a new way of being in a group, is beginning to carry over into other meetings and groups within the church. I hope outside the church as well, but I don't really have any way of knowing that.
- Participants report that not only is it great to really get to know new people (and this from both old-timers and newcomers), but they also get to know in a totally new way people they have "known" for 30 or 40 years.
- Newcomers especially report finally feeling like they 'belong'. Our membership committee reports that the most common reason cited these days for new members deciding to stay and to join was their SGM experience.

And that is as we have hoped it would be.