

SEPTEMBER 11, 2012: COVENANT GROUPS/SMALL GROUP MINISTRY

Editor: Rev. Robert Hill

When I wrote recently that Covenant Groups or Small Group Ministries would be especially important in post-9/11 times, I was not aware of the fact that our Arlington, VA, church is only about three miles from the Pentagon.

Michael McGee, co-minister there and a leader in the Small Group Ministries movement, wrote this week that the presence of Covenant Groups in his congregation has made a major difference.

NEAR THE PENTAGON

Here is what McGee wrote:

"Being at Ground Zero has been difficult for our congregation. Though we lost none of our members, we did have a memorial service for a UU at our church, and a number of our members either work at the Pentagon or have family or friends who do.

"We've responded to the national and community crisis in a number of ways: prayer vigils, special worship services, and opportunities for people to come to church to sit in silence or talk with others about their feelings.

"An especially effective program is being sponsored by a Covenant Group that has been reading Huston Smith's book, "The Religions of the World." For their social project they are hosting several programs on the Islamic Faith, the first one by a Muslim professor, the second by the local Imam, the third by two Muslim women speaking on women's issues, and the fourth by a State Department expert on the Middle East along with John McQuethy of ABC News (both church members) on geo-political issues. Now they are working on adding other speakers, including a rabbi and a Palestinian activist.

"The most effective program in our church to help our members and friends deal with the national tragedy has been our Covenant Groups. We have almost 100 people in the new Big Questions groups (and the Big Questions have suddenly become much bigger) and almost 100 in other covenant groups ranging from spiritual to political to pastoral themes.

"Our Covenant Groups have given people an opportunity to communicate their sadness, fears and anger and to build a more caring community. They have helped people to move towards healing and hope. I don't know how we could have made it through such a painful time without our these groups."

Michael McGee, Minister, Unitarian Universalist Church of Arlington, Virginia

NEAR THE TWIN TOWERS

And here is a remarkable story from New York, showing how one Covenant Group was able to assist someone assisting the workers trying to save people at the Twin Towers site. A member of Community Church, New York, Molly Scott, wrote:

"We have several small groups going here at the Community Church of New York, we call them Community Circles. Katie, a new member, joined one of the groups last March and is one of nine women who have meet together since then every two weeks.

"Katie is a massage therapist and lives in Greenwich Village not that far from the World Trade Center. She began trying to volunteer right away after the attacks on September 11th, but it was difficult to do because of the volume of volunteers available and the tight security in the area where they are working.

"Finally, she made the right contact and was assigned to a 36-hour shift beginning at 11 a.m. on Monday, September 17th in a high school in the secure zone around the rescue efforts. She told them that would be fine, but she would have to leave for a few hours in the evening for a very important meeting.

"Katie showed up at her Circle that evening looking pale and tired, but content. Dressed in sturdy work clothes with wide bands of masking tape across her chest identifying her as: 'Katie - Massage Therapist' labels which would get her back into the secure area later. After the meeting she headed back downtown to continue giving massages to the weary volunteers at 'Ground Zero' for the rest of her 36 hour shift.

"Are the Circles important to the participants? Yes indeed."

-- Molly Scott

LONG-TERM SIGNIFICANCE

Back in May, my friend and fellow UUA staff member, the Rev. Meg Ryan (Washington office) sent me an email about Covenant Groups in which she said, "Like you, I am convinced that these groups are the key to all things that are good and right...I have been involved for a number of years in such groups related to my Buddhist meditation practice and have found them invaluable...so I'm thrilled that they're becoming as common as "Spirit of Life" or lighting a chalice in our congregations. Covenant Groups are a major reason why I think the church will pull out of the deep spiritual hole it's been in."

If our Small Group Ministries have this power, as I agree they do, then they need to be in place for the many visitors our congregations are getting in the aftermath of the tragedy.

I think we can expect that the last of the bad news has not been absorbed. There are trying times ahead, including threats to civil liberties in this country as well as potentially divisive debates about foreign policies and internal politics, almost all involving moral and/or religious issues.

Small Group Ministry, Covenant Groups, can help us welcome, integrate, and come to know our new friends, people who have sought us out because of their spiritual needs and needs for friendship.

WELCOMING SEEKERS

So, we should pay attention to this message from Linda Hicks of our Hamilton, Ontario, congregation, whose experience of the first Sunday after Sept. 11 was replicated to one degree or another all over the continent:

"We . were filled to capacity. There were extra chairs set up, and one or two folks who came in late sat on the floor! Many were those we know, but there were also new faces.. After the service (which was intended to be on our Small Group Ministry Program - and in fact stayed somewhat true to the theme with a homily, by our Minister Allison Barrett, entitled "We need one another" and reflections on being in community and understanding how we can minister to one another) we did a small group session for those who wanted and needed to talk. About 60 people stayed for those discussions.

"Our average Sunday attendance is about 180, and we certainly had at least 225. A noted Canadian Broadcaster, on her Monday CBC radio show, in talking about having been at church the day before said, 'I haven't been to church (other than Christmas eve.) in 20 years'.

"Will we all be ready for many of these people who will join us again this Sunday? Can we offer them our message of tolerance and love? Are we able to make them feel that our congregations welcome them in their time of need? That is one of our main challenges as we prepare for the weekend(s) ahead."

-- Linda Hicks

CLOSING WORDS

Noting the "opportunity to talk about their fears, sadness and anger" that Covenant Groups in his church have given members and friends, Michael McGee added, "This is what it's all about." Indeed.

Linda Hicks says the Hamilton congregation used a responsive reading on Sept. 16 that ended: "It is when we come together, reaching out to be with one another, that we can begin again to believe in a world of justice and peace. Together we can risk hope and together we can invite back the image of beauty. Our small voices can join and form an insistent chorus that affirms that love is an awesome force."