

## **SERVICE IN SMALL GROUP MINISTRY**

*By the Rev. Calvin O. Dame, Augusta, Maine*

In June, Bob Hill and I spent a good deal of time chatting about Small Group Ministry/Covenant Groups in the hallways at the General Assembly in Quebec, the place where much of the best work of a General Assembly occurs. With the high level of interest in Covenant Groups that was evident at GA, ideas fairly crackled between us.

I hope to address a number of those topics here in the Covenant Group News. And I want to start with the topic of service as a part of Small Group Ministry, or as Bob has begun to call it, Covenant Group Ministry.

From the very first, our conception of the Small Group Ministry Program here in Augusta has include an expectation that each group would engage in some form of service to the congregation or beyond, over the course of a year.

This expectation arose from our study of the meta church material written by Carl George. But it also reflected the vision and the understanding that I and the members of our planning committee brought to the table. These groups are designed to encourage spiritual growth, and service is an outcome of a mature or maturing spiritual life. Check any source on this.

Also, there is a tendency in any small, intimate group to become self-absorbed. Service beyond the group is an antidote. Then, for real intimacy to develop, people need to do more than talk.

How has this worked? We are now into our fourth year of Small Group Ministry, and the service aspect of our small groups has become increasingly important to the life and the health of the groups. And while the planners always thought it would be important, it has take time for that importance to emerge and be shared more broadly.

### KINDS OF SERVICE

What kind of service have groups engaged in or contributed? It is wide ranging:

- ⤴ Sign up for all the ancillary chores on a Sunday morning: greeting, lighting the chalice, bringing the flowers, serving at coffee hour, supplying the music.
- ⤴ Running the All Church Services Auction (and repeating the next year).
- ⤴ Supplying a work crew to be auctioned off for a day of work.
- ⤴ Making desserts for the Canvass Kickoff Dinner
- ⤴ One group Christmas shopped together for a family, homeless because of domestic violence, that they had adopted through the Family Violence Project, then repaired to the church for wrapping and hot chocolate. The next year they adopted two.
- ⤴ Another group painted the church garage. Took two evenings and they may have picked up the Building and Grounds chair who was working with them.
- ⤴ Another group led a Sunday Service, successfully expanding from the Poetry Session topic.

Groups might show up for the work day or provide a reception after a Memorial Service. They have stripped and repainted classrooms or provided the crews for a potluck supper.

I don't even know what else, because they don't necessarily tell me.

New groups usually take a while to get around to this. The business of forming a real covenant and establishing a working group is plenty of work. But I encourage groups, after a couple of months, to tackle the "Service Session" topic from our collection of sessions. Some groups jump right in, some

take a while to get around to actually doing something. One group has flatly declined. (I just continue to suggest that they take a look at this expectation again in six months)

I want to point out here that many of the members of our groups are already active in the congregation. They chair committees, sit on the Board, help with the canvass and show up on work days. And many of these people are busy in the rest of their lives, they are physicians, teachers, lawyers, lobbyists, business people, parents.

### RESULTS OF SERVICE

But here is the plain, unvarnished truth. The groups that fulfill this expectation have become the strongest groups. And one successful project leads to another; the service component of the group's life becomes a welcome part of the group's life.

Now, I know that just getting a program up and going in a congregation takes a lot of work. And I understand that almost any healthy group adds to the life of a congregation. But I want to urge people to take seriously the service part of the Small Group Ministry/Covenant Group Ministry idea.

I think that the biggest danger that the covenant group movement faces lies not in expecting too much, but in not dreaming big enough. The strength and (roaring) success of this movement thus far is a result of our encouraging each other to take our religious journeys seriously, to take our faith seriously, and to gather together to support one another on those journeys. A life of faith is a life of service. You can check any source on this.

-- Calvin Dame