

Small Group Ministry: Universalism

Rev. John Morgan, *Covenant Group News* February 29 and March 13, 2000

Note from Rev. Bob Hill, *Covenant Group News* Editor. The Rev. John C. Morgan, who has served the UUA, two districts, and a number of our congregations, is the author of "*The Devotional Heart: Pietism and the Renewal of American Unitarian Universalism.*" Published in 1995 by Skinner House, the book looked at the earliest layer of Universalism in Europe and America and found there a small-group process with similarities to the meta-church or Covenant Group concept. "While we tend to think of the small group process as belonging to other religious traditions," he says, "the fact is that is rooted in our own as well." Here is his account of what he discovered.

Small Group Ministry: Rooted in Universalism

Covenant Group News February 29, 2000

I should have listened the day I heard Dr. James Luther Adams give a lecture at Andover Newton Theological School. Now, twenty years later, I know he was saying something I would need to discover myself in the midst of being a Unitarian Universalist minister.

In response to a question about why people came to our religious communities at all, Dr. Adams was quite succinct: They came for *ultimacy* and *intimacy*.

He went on to explain that they came to wrestle with (and from time to time to actually find answers to) life's ultimate questions. Who am I? In what or in whom do I trust? In what community do I belong? And they came for a sense of intimacy, a safe place in which they could be accepted while making connections with others.

Over the years, I have found Adams' theory to meet the test of parish ministry. People come into our communities looking for a place to belong (intimacy) and a place to seek meaning (ultimacy) about living and dying and the spaces between. And though I hoped the churches I served could meet these two needs, I sometimes found how short we fell.

Both at Once Plus Growth

To the question of intimacy, we offered positions on committees. To the issue of ultimacy, we talked more about increasing membership or pledging rather than the depth of our commitment to a cause in the world and to each other. And we often banked on Sundays to meet both needs, as if this were even possible. Perhaps these are the reasons why the overwhelming majority of our congregations are still under 250 members?

I chose to serve either smaller churches or start new ones in my ministry, because I believed there was a correlation between size and intimacy and ultimacy (and there is), but I have learned that we limit ourselves by thinking small and that it is quite possible to have both ultimacy and intimacy at the same time, whether the church is fifty or five hundred members.

What is required is no less than a transformation of our paradigm of what it means to be a church and an equal change in our attitude about what it means to do ministry.

For some fortunate reason, I discovered in our own heritage a rich and wonderful resource -- the early Universalist Pietists -- and I happened on a different but convergent model for a church, the so-called "meta-

church" described by Carl George, author of *The Coming Church Revolution*.

Small group ministry is not simply another "program" in the church along with worship and religious education. Rightly seen, small group ministry is the church seeking to meet both the needs for intimacy and ultimacy—it is a model driven by the needs of the people, not a denomination or the minister. That's quite revolutionary, if you think about it—and very congregational in polity!

Reform Through Study Circles

From Thomas Potter's chapel in New Jersey to George de Benneville's house church outside Reading, Pennsylvania, the earliest expressions of Universalism in America were clearly "Pietistic," a term which simply refers to the religion of the heart. They were often German, not English. And they were more firmly rooted in the Mid-Atlantic states than New England, though Rhode Island has a goodly share of Pietists.

The early expressions of Pietism were clearly reformist—the method of reform being the use of small study circles. In these "colleges of piety" or "conventicles," as they were called, people met once a week to share their stories, discuss the Sunday sermon, and interpret scripture. The clergy sat in, not just as teachers, but as members of the groups, the early Pietists believing churches, not seminaries, trained ministers.

In my view, this Pietist reform began in 1675 when Phillip Jacob Spener, a Lutheran pastor, initiated small group ministry as a way to reform the church of his time. It worked beyond his expectations, creating not only revivals in Europe, but spinning off reform among Lutherans, Methodists, Moravians, Quakers, Universalists, and others in the new world.

The earliest proponents of Universalism in America adopted the Pietist model for churches long before John Murray and the first Universalist church of America began

in Massachusetts (remember, too, that Murray spent years with Thomas Potter in New Jersey and was a circuit rider before he was a settled minister).

Through I haven't found the written proof yet, I am sure that Universalist Pietists from Rhode Island (they were called "Singing Quakers," believe it or not) and missionaries from the Ephrata Cloister in Pennsylvania, including de Benneville, visited Thomas Potter in New Jersey, and thereby paved the way for Rev. John Murray.

Small Group Ministry: 5 Lessons, Some Conclusions

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What are some of the lessons we may learn from our own Universalist heritage and from the growth of small group ministries today?

First, the small group ministry process does speak to both the needs for ultimacy and intimacy among our members and newcomers. In groups of no more than ten, people are able to find a sense of community and a safe haven to share their spiritual journeys and continuing struggles. Committee meetings and Sunday worship simply don't fill both needs by themselves.

Second, small group ministry is not simply another "program" in the church (a mistake I made in two of my ministries), but is, in fact, the major principle or guiding philosophy behind what it means to be a church. If a congregation is to meet the deepest spiritual needs of community and meaning, then small group ministry is the way to go.

Third, small group ministry can take place in any size church, whether it be thirty or a thousand. In fact, I would argue that when a church goes beyond a few hundred people, a small group ministry is the best way to

retain a sense of community while still growing.

Fear Unfounded: The fear Unitarian Universalists have of losing community because of growth is a false one, I believe -- sometimes used by people to keep things the way they are and sometimes by people who are afraid of what they might lose. The good news is that it is possible to grow in numbers and in depth, if one is willing to adopt a different paradigm or model. The one minister/one staff/one Sunday worship model may fit who we have been, but there are increasing numbers of folks saying this model won't fit the new century, one in which people feel alienated and [have increased needs for] community and meaning.

Fourth, small group ministry will change the very nature of our churches and the leadership which guides them. One minister simply cannot be "in charge" of a church which adopts a small group ministry. It takes a different model of ministry -- "shared" we call it today -- to work. And it takes leaders schooled in small group dynamics, training other leaders, leading worship, sharing ministry, and long range planning -- not just chaplains or pastors or teachers, but literally people who don't need to be first and upfront, but behind the scenes and letting go.

My suspicion is that one of the chief reasons we have conflict in our midst today is that we haven't yet really learned to share ministry. Some ministers still want to hold on to the authority, even as parishioners clamor for more. The dynamic set in motion is not healthy.

Fifth, "meta" means "transformation," and small group ministry surely will bring about changes, some of them uncomfortable (e.g., ministers will have to learn new roles, leaders will need to let go, structures will need to be lean and serve the people, rather than vice versa).

Frees Religious Professionals: One of the hard lessons for the early Pietists was that after people were in small groups for a while, they began to see what they weren't getting in the larger church -- intimacy and ultimacy -- and started agitating for change. Some early Pietists left their churches (George de Benneville was one) because their spiritual needs were not being met. Therefore, it is very important that small groups be seen as part of the larger congregations (cells within a larger cell) and not as separate units. For example, Phillip Jacob Spener, the Lutheran pastor who initiated small group ministry in this country, [had his] small groups [meeting in] the church, not in the homes of parishioners, and he made sure the small groups studied Sunday sermons and read common texts.

Carl George, one of the leading proponents of the small group ministry and the author of *The Coming Church Revolution*, argues, rightly I believe, that the future requires us to adopt new models of what it means to be a spiritual community, a model that is relational at heart, a church in which ministry is a network of care and concern, not a service provided by professionals. In fact, I would argue that this small group ministry process frees religious workers to take care of their own spiritual needs while being strengthened to do ministry together with others.

In short, the small group ministry model is both consistent with the earliest Universalist heritage and very relevant to our faith as it shapes itself in the Twenty-First Century. Small group ministry meets the needs of those who come to our churches, needs identified twenty years ago or more by Dr. James Luther Adams, who said people come to us for ultimacy and intimacy. There are even some of us who feel that this is where God is calling us into the future, but that's a theological discussion for another time, hopefully in a small group!

Excerpts from: THE DEVOTIONAL HEART

By John C. Morgan (Skinner House Books, 1995, used with permission)

Covenant Group News March 22, 2000, with note from Editor: Rev. Bob Hill

In 1995, the UUA's Skinner House Press published "The Devotional Heart," by the Rev. John C. Morgan. Now out of print, this book on pietism and renewal in American Unitarian Universalism called attention to small-group processes with similarities to our current meta-church or Covenant Group method of organization. John wrote about these historical roots in the previous two CGNews issues and we conclude his observations here with excerpts he selected from his book.

What were the central teachings of Pietistic Universalism?

1. Creeds and formalisms are secondary to a living, tolerant faith.
2. God's love for all creation, and the eventual restoration of all creation to "happiness and holiness."
3. A deeply felt need for a "theology of experience."
4. Reformation of the existing churches along New Testament lines, with an emphasis placed on individuals taking responsibility for their own spiritual development, Bible study, and lay ministry.
5. Pietists did not take it (the Bible) literally, but read it in the light of "the spirit." Experience was to be trusted....
6. An element of hope in the theology, leading to the search for the transformation of life in the present.

7. A focus on individual growth that may have supported the emerging critical reason of the Enlightenment.

[Phillip Jacob] Spener's primary rationale for reform [in the late 1600s]...was to renew Luther's call for a universal spiritual priesthood. All Christians might carry out ministerial functions.... Central to...reforms are study classes in piety, or collegia pietatis.

The small study groups probably began from a sermon Spener preached on the righteousness of the Pharisees (Matt. 5:20-26). Some hearers of that sermon were so enraged by Spener's indictment that they threatened not to return to church. But others were moved to ask how they might lead more righteous lives. He responded by inviting them to his home for instructive twice a week....

On Mondays, Spener repeated the main points of his Sunday sermon, with the group members seeking to apply the message to their lives. On Wednesdays, the group would read and discuss the scriptures....

Every reformation begins with one small step... We are conditioned to think of church growth as adding more members to an existing body, but, in fact, the more small cells or groups there are within a church, meeting specific needs, the more likelihood there is for overall growth....

(CGNews EDITOR'S NOTE: And, what are the two specific needs that Covenant Groups meet? The need for spiritual uplift and the need for friends, or as James Luther Adams put it: ultimacy and intimacy.)

John Morgan's next book to be published by Skinner House will be a daily devotional book for religious liberals.