

Small Group Ministry Beyond the Congregation

Contributed by Susan Hollister, Durham, NC

Rev. Dr. M'ellen Kennedy, co-founder of the UU SGM Network, is doing innovative work with small group ministry in a variety of settings. "My vision," says Rev. Kennedy, "is to bring small group ministry out of our congregations and into the community. Folks in all kinds of settings are longing to experience friendship and spiritual growth in a supportive, non-coercive, respectful and diverse environment." One example is the work Rev. Kennedy has done as a volunteer Interfaith Chaplain at the Vermont State Psychiatric Hospital where she offered a group called "Friends on the Path." The group was enthusiastically received by patients and staff alike. "Group members told me that it was one of the only opportunities in that hectic environment for quiet reflection and deep connections. It had the unexpected benefit of dissolving the distinctions between patients and staff because in the group we are all just spiritual seekers." For a service project, the patients in the group designed and offered an interfaith Thanksgiving worship service for the hospital. It was wonderful for them to take pride and enjoyment in being in the role of offering something from their hearts and not just being recipients of care. "I'm offering a group now in my Mom's retirement home and the folks thoroughly enjoy it. I would love to see small groups offered in jails, prisons, assisted living facilities and wherever folks are in need of opportunities for spiritual exploration and friendship. It has tremendous potential as a social action outreach from our congregations into the community."

Rev. M'ellen Kennedy and Rev. Stephen Shick, Minister Emeritus of Unitarian Church of Marlborough & Hudson, MA, offer a workshop called Preaching By Heart (www.preachingbyheart.org) on how to preach extemporaneously. The workshop was accepted by the UU Ministers Association CENTER as one of the endorsed workshops for UUMA chapters for continuing education options for ministers. "SGM is a significant part of what makes this workshop zing," says Rev. Kennedy. Workshop attendees participate in a small group in the morning which helps them get to know each other and explore together what they find both appealing and frightening about this approach to preaching. In the afternoon, they return to the same small groups and each person does a short homily without a text. The rapport they have developed in the morning small group is the foundation that makes it possible for everyone to give it a try and be successful in their first attempt. Rev. Kennedy says, "It's a very exciting process to see folks finding their authentic voice in the pulpit." Workshop attendees have included not just parish ministers, but lay leaders and community ministers as well.

The small group ministry model is also part of Rev. Kennedy's work with Peace and Unity Bridge (www.peaceandunitybridge.org) an organization she founded that is dedicated to cultivating friendship and understanding among Muslims and non-Muslims. "I'm ordained as a Sufi minister as well as a UU minister, so I feel that I have a foot in both worlds which enables me to bridge the difference in a unique and effective way." Last spring she offered the workshop "Facing Islamophobia" at All Souls UU Congregation in New London, CT, in collaboration with All Souls' Rev. Carolyn Patierno, the local interfaith group, and the Islamic Center of New London. "We had over 75 folks in attendance, including many Muslims. The workshop was very well received. We use small groups as part of the process, and I'm convinced this is crucial in making it work so well. It's rewarding to see Muslims and non-Muslims in conversation and developing understandings with each other." Rev. Kennedy has offered the workshop in about 12 venues in the past 2 years with grant support from the Fund for UU Social Responsibility. Her work has been endorsed by the imam of the mosque in Portsmouth, NH, and by the current and past presidents of the Islamic Council of New England. Rev. Kennedy intends to keep finding new ways to use power of the small group ministry model to help people in diverse settings experience Intimacy and Ultimacy and in so doing, help heal our broken and aching world one group at a time.