

## SMALL GROUP MINISTRY AND GROWTH

by Diana Dorroh in *Covenant Group News, August, September, November 2009*

### **PART 1 (CGN August 2009)**

You may remember the early promises that Small Group Ministry would make our UU churches grow rapidly. It certainly works for the meta-churches (change churches). These churches use "side door entry" to get neighbors and friends into small groups and then into church membership. They also often pitch their Sunday morning service to newcomers. It can be quite systematic and produces large numbers.

UU churches with Small Group Ministry programs have experienced somewhat different patterns of growth than these meta-churches. I'm interested in collecting stories about those patterns.

Here's the story from my church. We implemented Small Group Ministry at the Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge ten years ago. Our minister, Rev. Steve Crump, invited every new member to join a group and within five years, we had more than half of our membership in Small Group Ministry. Our church membership was 300 ten years ago and is 390 now; so, over the ten years, we have grown by 30%. However, in the first six years of that decade, our growth was about 2% a year. Then, it accelerated to about 5% and now a surge of visitors and new members has resulted in 10% growth this year.

I am aware of two systems that are used in UU circles to analyze church growth. We'll be discussing these two systems and producing answers to the questions: What do they tell us about the growth patterns we've seen in UU churches? What does this experience and our understanding of the systems tell us about how Small Group Ministry can be used to enhance church growth?

One well known system is the four kinds of growth identified by Loren Mead in "*More than Numbers: the Ways Churches Grow*"-- numerical, organizational, maturational, and incarnational. <http://www.uua.org/documents/congservices/conggrowth.pdf>.

Another system of three metrics that can be used to analyze church growth and help churches decide where to put emphasis is described in "*Congregations Count*," [http://www.uua.org/documents/laskowskilinda/congregationscount\\_070519.pdf](http://www.uua.org/documents/laskowskilinda/congregationscount_070519.pdf), by Linda Laskowaski, UU Church of Berkley. The metrics have been used as the basis for membership workshops offered by the UUA.

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What's your growth story? Have you experienced growth after implementing Small Group Ministry? How much? Was that growth steady or did it accelerate, decline, or peak? When did you start Small Group Ministry? What percentage of your congregation participates in Small Group Ministry?

## **PART 2 MATURATIONAL, INCARNATIONAL, ORGANIZATIONAL AND NUMERICAL GROWTH – (CGN September 2009)**

Let's consider the four kinds of growth described by Loren Mead in "More than Numbers: the Ways Churches Grow." I am using definitions of the four values prepared by Connie Goodbread, the Rev. Susan M. Smith, and Penny Ramsdell.

***Maturation Growth*** is the ability of a congregation to challenge, support and encourage each one of its members to grow in the maturity of their faith, to deepen their spiritual roots, and to broaden their religious imagination.

Sounds like what happens in Small Group Ministry, doesn't it? Small Group Ministry is a wonderful tool for allowing members to grow spiritually. Growth occurs when people adopt the spiritual practice of acceptance and listening. And, if there are enough small groups, the congregation grows maturationally, as the covenantal behavior spills over into committee meetings, congregational meetings, and all areas of congregational life. How many groups does it take? It seems to happen when 50% of the congregation is or has been involved in the program. Having every member of your church board in a covenant group is also a significant achievement.

***Incarnational Growth*** is living out our core shared values. What is it that the congregation seeks to export from its life back into the life of the world, the social environment in which it exists? What are the good works that we are doing that will make the world a better place? Incarnational growth can be an ongoing process or a sudden event.

Small Group Ministry can help. It provides a setting where core shared values and their application to individuals and the congregation can be explored. Another observation is that maturational growth prepares the congregation to incarnate its values.

***Organic Growth*** is the task of building the community, fashioning the organizational structures and infrastructure, developing the practices and processes that result in a dependable, stable network of human relationships and systems in which we can grow and from which we can make a difference.

Small Group Ministry builds and encourages members to become leaders. Leaders are recruited and trained to facilitate the small groups, of course, but more leadership also springs from reflection on the value of the church community. Also, the network of covenant groups is itself a new structure and this structure strengthens the church. It is worth noting that the Methodists call them "cell groups".

***Numerical Growth*** is adding new members while maintaining the numbers that are already within the congregation.

These might include attendance and participation in small groups or religious education, and income and expenditures. Small Group Ministry helps with numerical growth by providing the connections that people coming to our congregations seek. We will explore this topic of numerical growth more next month, as we look at the metrics of growth.

Small Group Ministry, with its emphasis on intimacy and ultimacy, facilitates both maturational and incarnational growth. Since Small Group Ministry is so successful in promoting maturational growth, it also makes incarnational growth possible and readies a congregation for it. And in building leadership and providing connections, it promotes organic and numerical growth. In my own congregation in Baton Rouge, LA, we have noticed a certain civilizing effect after about six years of having 50% of our members in Small Group Ministry. Leaders and other

congregation members, for the most part, listen more and are more accepting. I would say our congregation has grown maturationally. We haven't had a significant church conflict in ten years and I'm hoping we all treat each other better when the next one comes. Leadership is trained and developed, continuously, since we have 32 group leaders at all times, but new community members also seem to be taking on leadership sooner because of their covenant group experiences. In one of our groups, the leaders observed that almost every member had taken on a leadership role within 2 years of the start of the group. Opportunities for incarnating our values presented themselves to us in 2005 in the form of Katrina and, in 2007, with the situation of the Jena Six, in which six black Louisiana high school students were charged with attempted murder following the hanging of a noose at the high school. Then, as one of our leaders said, "We incarnated our values and people came." We did seem to get some numerical growth after the incarnational growth. It all seems connected to me and inextricably woven with Small Group Ministry.

### **PART 3 METRICS FOR NUMERICAL GROWTH – (CGN November 2009)**

We'll begin with a repeat of the information about three growth metrics from the August 2009 CG News:

Another system of three metrics that can be used to analyze church growth and help churches decide where to put emphasis is described in "Congregations Count," [http://www.uua.org/documents/laskowskilinda/congregationscount\\_070519.pdf](http://www.uua.org/documents/laskowskilinda/congregationscount_070519.pdf), by Linda Laskowski, UU Church of Berkeley. The metrics have been used as the basis for membership workshops offered by the UUA. These three metrics are described below:

(1) The **Visitor to Member Ratio** is the ratio of the number of first time visitors for a year to the number of members. In growing churches, it is 1:1.

(2) The **Conversion Rate** is the number of new members divided by the number of first time visitors over a period of at least a year. 20% is a very good rate for a UU congregation. 14 - 20% is the expected range.

(3) The **Loss Rate** is the percentage of members that leave a congregation during one year. We're told to expect 10-12% loss, with half from moves or death. An example may be helpful: A church of 100 members has had 100 new visitors over the last year. 15% of those 100 visitors became members. The Loss Rate was 12%, as 12 members left the church. The net growth was 3 or 3%.

What effect can a good Small Group Ministry (Covenant Groups) Program have? Let's assume your church has quality worship and children's religious education, good volunteer involvement and a competent and adequate staff; that is, nothing that is obviously holding back growth.

**Visitor to Member Ratio** - Wow. It should be 1:1! That's as many visitors every year as you have members. At my church it's currently only 250:380 or 66%. This is obviously where we need to put some effort. Can Small Group Ministry help you attract more visitors? It might attract people looking for a church with a Small Group Ministry program. And it could be a good advertisement. "Come join us and we'll offer you an experience of intimacy and ultimacy and help you learn to listen and be more accepting of your family and friends." Some of our congregations are advertising their Small Group Ministry Programs on their websites. You can see a list of websites of interest on the UU Small Group Ministry Network website <http://www.smallgroupministry.net/membership.html>.

**The Conversion Rate** - If an invitation to join a covenant group is extended to newcomers, I would expect more first-time visitors would join your church. In Baton Rouge, we invite participants of our newcomers class to join a covenant group. If a newcomer joins a covenant group, church membership usually follows. We have only about 10 of our 220 participants who are not church members. What happens in your church? Do covenant group members join your church? Our Conversion Rate was 25% the last time I calculated it. Like most churches, we have some other good pieces in place, a good Visitor Table, visitor follow-up and a newcomers class taught by the minister. It seems to me that the pieces work together to welcome visitors to our church. I'd like to hear about your numbers. If you're starting a program or have just started one, perhaps you could send us the comparison of Conversion Rates before and after your program was implemented.

**The Loss Rate** - I would absolutely expect a good Small Group Ministry program to allow your church to retain more members. Why would a member ever want to leave your church if they're participating in a Covenant Group, experiencing support and acceptance, getting to have deep conversations on relevant topics and getting connected to 8 - 10 other people and to the church? Getting new people into groups should especially reduce the losses of our newest members. This is why we started our program in Baton Rouge ten years ago. We wanted a way for new members to make immediate connections so we wouldn't lose so many so fast. I was able to compare the loss rate of new members before and after we implemented our program. I didn't keep the numbers, but I remember that it was quite a dramatic change. I also remember summarizing that people in Covenant Groups rarely left our church unless they moved or died. The people who do drop out of the Covenant Group program should be candidates for special follow-up.

Small Group Ministry can help prevent large losses in times of crisis and change. Example of crises: an unexpected or acrimonious ministerial resignation or damage to the church building from fire or flood. Examples of change: An interim minister and new minister, erecting a new building or living with less income. Crisis and change come to all congregations. When they do, Small Group Ministry can help by maintaining connections and a place where congregation members can minister to each other. With skillful leadership, the groups can even be a vehicle for sharing feelings and concerns related to the change or crisis. By helping keep the congregation intact, it can prevent massive (15 - 25%) membership losses and thus contribute to growth over the long term.

So will a new or bigger and better Small Group Ministry Program make your church grow? Yes, if you:

(1) have enough visitors to make growth possible (80 - 100% of membership per year), and

(2) offer membership in a Covenant Group to visitors and get your new members into a group.

If you do (2) for a few years, you'll soon find that a majority of your members are in the program. Then, you should see a larger growth rate. Your rate could increase by 1 - 5%.

What? All this effort to get new people into groups and new visitors into the church and then I still have to wait for significant growth? And even then, it would take years for my congregation to double in size? Might not be worth it unless the program also made it a better church, would it? Luckily, it does. As we saw in Part 2 of this series, it brings maturational, incarnational, and organizational growth, as well as the numerical growth we've been focusing on in this article and so, you'll have a better church, and, oh by the way, bigger.