

Small Groups In The Free Church

Rev. Dr. Brent A. Smith, *Covenant Group News*, May 10, 1999

Note from Rev. Robert Hill, Editor, CGN: Our guest columnist for this issue is Brent Smith, who will be leaving All Souls, Tulsa, OK, this summer after being Senior Minister there for about six years. During that time the adult membership has increased from 1,000 or so to over 1,500, growth Brent attributes in large part to the use of what some of us are calling Covenant Groups. By whatever name, the goal is to offer those who come to our churches (a) frequent opportunities to be lifted above the mundane and (b) equally frequent chances to form friendship bonds, all in the relative safety of small groups.

A woman came up to me and told her story: "I was here at All Souls in the 1980's and began going through my divorce. I knew very few people here and had to go to the Methodist Church to find companionship. I've returned ten years later because I decided to give All Souls one more chance. If it were not for the ROOTS and BRANCHES groups, I would have had to leave again."

A man told his story: "This is the most important thing that has ever happened to me in my life." Still another: "I have discovered lifelong friendships here, people I will grow old with."

These are responses to our small groups ministry (called ROOTS and BRANCHES), as we seek to implement the meta-church model of church organization.

The "What" of Small Groups

A few years ago sociologist Robert Wuthnow, who has studied small groups and church life, estimated that "there are presently over 3 million small groups in this country." With that in mind, if you are seeking a vision for your church, take this "test."

Get Kennon Callahan's excellent resource, "The Twelve Keys to the Effective Church," turn to the portion devoted to "relational groups," and see where your church falls in terms of the number of groups relative to your size. This will indicate the future of growth in your church; not in terms of numbers in the door today, but in terms of numbers of members and church leaders available in 2010.

Why? People are currently "returning" to church...But they are returning for specific reasons that arise from identifiable needs that we in religion have long termed "spiritual hunger." And their "institutional loyalty," which will determine whether they're in your pews and on your boards in 2010, is virtually non-existent and, if developed, will be tied to their spiritual growth.

Small groups are the answer to the trend, the need, and the hunger, because they are designed for this. A small group within the Free Church is a voluntary, intentional gathering of seven to fourteen people regularly meeting together with the shared goal of mutual edification, fellowship, and service to the cause of religious freedom.

The "Why" of Small Groups

The small group is an intentional gathering because it is an institution's response to a need and a hunger. People are returning to church with a certain desperation. They have deep needs that haven't been addressed through any other aspect of their lives. They never thought they'd find themselves in a church, but that's where they've landed. They are suspicious of religious institutions and have no loyalty to them or to any specific one of them. But they hunger. They're lonely and seek true fellowship.

Robert Wuthnow writes, "Contemporary small groups, often meeting under the aegis of large congregations, can be seen as a partial response to the breakdown of indigenous communities such as extended families, villages, or intimate neighborhoods. ... They're alienated and seek connection. ...small groups bring a wide variety of people together and require that they become committed to one another in common understanding."

They are ignorant of religion but wish to learn. "A strong teaching ministry and numerical growth go hand in hand," church consultant Lyle Shaller says. And business guru Peter Senge says, "Human beings are designed for learning."

People want a purpose and meaning to their life. This is the ground upon which the Free Church has stood ever since our forebears in North America covenanted with one another, "to walk in the ways of God as they are made known to us." It is ground with which we should be familiar.

The "Whom" of Small Groups

The members of long standing in our churches have their "small groups." They have found ways to deal with the needs and hungers they had when they first came to your church. Many of them found their connectedness through committee work or women's alliances or volunteering for the church. The church's "implicit schedule" is arranged for them. They know when their "connections" meet, how they're advertised, who the important contact people are, etc.

In my experience longer standing members do not know why small group ministries are needed (They'll ask, "Well, why don't they just join a committee?") nor will they understand why new people don't come to events that form part of the longer standing members "connections" (They'll say, "We invited them to the Day Alliance luncheon and they didn't come").

New people know little of church, and what they do know has been learned from stereotypes. This is why at All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa we focused on new people to begin developing our small groups ministry.

"A church that considers itself 'one big family' will have a harder time growing than one that thinks in terms of being a conglomeration of groups, classes, organizations, and fellowships. The reason is that the second approach gives newcomers many more ways of plugging into the life of the church." --Lyle Schaller.

Since ignorance of the basics of religion is so widespread, we started through "educational experiences" whose underlying "subtext" was fellowship. So, our newcomers go through a four session, one-session-a-week class called ROOTS, taught by the ministers who both impart information and help the group begin to act like a group.

At the end of the month those who wish a "deeper relationship with All Souls" move into a BRANCHES group, which is led by a layperson selected and trained by the ministers. The content of the BRANCHES experience, from curriculum to group dynamics to resources used for spirituality, are selected by the minister. The minister also trains the leaders and serves as their small group leader.

"There is a direct relationship between the successfulness of the group leaders and their commitment to regular training" -- Dale Galloway.

In this way the minister fulfills the role of spiritual leader of the congregation, and lay leaders fulfill the role of spiritual mentors and transmitters of the congregation's customs and practices.

We have also tried with modest success to expand our understandings of church to conceive of the entire church in terms of

small groups: social justice ministries, church school parents, supper groups, athletic teams, etc. We are continuing to develop an "institutional" base for these groups so they too serve to strengthen the church and fulfill its mission through addressing spiritual hunger.

The "When" and "How" of Small Groups

Small groups meet regularly, although the rate of meeting depends upon the kind of group. No groups in our church meet more than once a week, or less than once a month. The groups set the meeting times themselves.

We encourage meeting in homes and not the church, and require this of our BRANCHES groups. Since the activity - education, social service, serving the church, fun, food - is secondary to the quality of human connections, we want people to meet each other on "personal" and not "public" turf.

Each small group has a leader (trained by clergy), an assistant leader (mentored by leader), a hospitality person, a "missionary" (selected to start a new group), and some have additional roles like childcare coordinator, secretary (to send reminder notices), etc. The group will become part of a "family" of groups whose leaders are all in a small group with the minister, for ongoing education and training occurs.

Two Rules

Two rules hold for small groups in the church setting. First, that the small group must take as one of its reasons for existing (its mission within the entire mission of the church itself) the starting of another group. This keeps a larger vision before the group and is the main ingredient in getting new people to develop loyalty to the church institution. They share in its mission. And secondly, that the group connects itself in intentional ways to the larger body of the church.

"There is a danger in some that the group itself becomes deified" -- Robert Wuthnow.

At All Souls we seek to avoid this in several ways: 1) by having the ministers responsible for the written resources, 2) by having groups sit together at worship, 3) by having groups go to breakfast or brunch around church worship, 4) by using for small group worship resources used by the church in its worship services.

It is imperative in Free Churches that both rules be followed. You will find out why if they are not!

Each of our study groups develops a group covenant from resources provided by the ministers. In this way each individual can see how the group needs his or her contribution, and how service outside the group is so very important. Small groups demand commitment.

"Churches where the commitment is high are more effective at attracting people from the baby boom and younger generations." -- Lyle Shaller.

In this way the small group serves as a microcosm of the church by setting expectations of involvement. Likewise, the church itself draws much of its leadership now from those in small group experiences, especially the study groups.

Individuals know more about themselves, the Free Church tradition, the workings of groups, how to lead people, why people come to church, and what will help them stay and grow. Not only does it account for our church's growth the past six years, but also how we are training the next generation of church leaders.

Biography of Dr. Brent A. Smith June 2009

Dr. Brent A. Smith was born in 1954 and raised in Richmond, Indiana, graduating with a Bachelor of Arts degree in literature from Hanover College in 1976. In college Dr. Smith studied Existentialism, American literature, and the works of James Joyce, while also receiving All-American honors as a linebacker on the Hanover College football team. After several years working in the business world, Dr. Smith acted upon a call to the ministry by entering the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, graduating with a Masters of Arts degree in 1983, and with a Doctor of Ministry degree from Meadville/Lombard Theological School in 1984. While in seminary Dr. Smith studied the works of Paul Tillich, Soren Kierkegaard, Mircea Eliade, and wrote his doctoral dissertation on pragmatism and the religious philosophy of William James under the direction of David Tracy. Dr. Smith was ordained into the Unitarian Universalist ministry and began serving his first congregation in north Milwaukee in 1983, and has served congregations in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and Grand Rapids, Michigan, where he is currently serving All Souls Community Church, a new start congregation. He has published numerous articles, started one national and one regional publication, has hosted and helped to write and produce a national television show, *Faith in the Free Church* for the Faith and Values Network, and has written several adult religious education curricula especially designed for the unchurched. He has been featured in the *Sightings* online journal of the Martin Marty Center at the University of Chicago, and the *Journal of Liberal Religion*, with his most recent article, "A New Birth of Freedom," on Abraham Lincoln and the idea of covenant, available at: http://meadville.edu/LL_JLR_v8_n1_Smith.htm Currently, he is President of the Heartland UUMA Chapter and serves on the Midwest Regional Sub-Committee of the MFC. Dr. Smith lives in Grand Rapids with his wife Pat, a lawyer with Grand Valley

State University. They have two grown children, Elizabeth and Josh.