

Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network CGN Excerpts
SOCIAL JUSTICE

CGN May 2008 **EXCERPTS FROM A MESSAGE FROM A NON-UU, DICK GILBERT**

Over the years I have come to the conviction that the central, compelling, and unavoidable imperative for people of faith is the transformation of the world—in the words of Forrest Church, "transforming society according to the principles of justice, compassion and love."...

I would like to find a way to hook the power of the small group to the imperative for and urgency of social transformation. Not just in personal empowerment for individual action, but in the corporate strength and intentional activity of the small group itself....

I note that some UU small groups have linked the SGM experience to service projects (Calvin Dame, "Service: An Essential Element of Small Group Ministry"), encouraging small groups to include some sort of service project in their agenda. I would like to take that a step or two further and insist that the very purpose of the SGM be to prepare for, support, and sustain specific social change efforts AS A GROUP. I am convinced that lasting social transformation can only happen from the ground up and I see these micro-communities as a potential base to begin that effort.

COMMENTS FROM THE EDITOR AND A CALL FOR INPUT

I agree with Dick Gilbert that this would be a wonderful way to organize social justice work in a congregation. However, I fear that many people who benefit from my own church's small group ministry program in Baton Rouge would not continue to participate if we narrowed our focus from participants' lives to social justice.

I know that some churches have tried organizing a group or two around the objective of social justice. This usually happens in a church using what Rev. Bob Hill called the "affinity group" model, where groups have different special interests and use the discussion part of the standard session to discuss that interest or make plans.

I hope either Dick or I have made you want to respond. I'd love to hear your reactions and your experiences. More generally, I'd like to open a discussion on the role of service in small group ministry. Please share one project your group has done. And if you're willing, you could also tell us: How important is service to your group? To your program? Does it help to promote intimacy and ultimacy? Does it provide connection to the church and to the larger community?

Please send your input to office@smallgroupministry.net.

CGN June 2008 **EXCERPTS FROM A MESSAGE FROM A NON-UU, DICK GILBERT**

Can you see my grin? You're the second person to mention that Richard Gilbert today. I assure you I am not him, though I have been running into this over the years. I live in Orlando and am a retired social service professional, businessman and lifelong United Methodist.

COMMENTS FROM DIANE BANTA IN DEERFIELD, IL

It seems to me that the message Dick Gilbert who surely is a UU : sends, is not one that suggests social justice should be separate from a "focus on participants lives". Indeed a major part of his ministry to our denomination has been to teach us how to live our beliefs, and core values bringing religion and

life together. He has prepared some of the best materials our denomination has to offer to help people achieve a level of praxis - The Religious Imperative and the Building Your Own Theology series might be interesting reading/ study for a cov group.

My experience is that groups grow stronger and last longer when the members work together as well as bond over discussions of their lives. When the project grows out of core values of the group these are not separate activities. They build on and reinforce each other.

I think it is helpful to not limit what a social action project can be. we usually think it has to be participating in some major event or raising money for a cause. but educating ones self and then others is an important 1st step. Preparing a church service or participating as a group in a community service... We have one group that has taken overpart of the church garden, They do a lot of talking while they are weeding. Another group makes meals for a shelter every other month. One does eco projects with kids One (in an emerging congregation I worked with) does a yearly church service. Note: None of these started as so called affinity groups. A major gift of Cov groups is that they get us out of our selves - As a time and space to share with others, Cov groups begin to let us focused on and hopefully care about the others members of our group. The group becomes a cohesive unit. It is a natural step and I believe a healthy one to "get out of ourselves" as a group as well. In deed in stepping out everyone goes deeper. When your group talks what do they share ? What do they care about What makes they cry ? What brings them joy? Some where in the focus of peoples lives, I believe their is a project for you. Thanks for letting me share and Many thanks to the Rev Richard Gilbert for all he has done to help UUs get into their heads and open their hearts!

Sincerely, Diane Banta Member, NSUC Deerfield IL

COMMENTS ON SERVICE AND SOCIAL JUSTICE FROM CONNIE VALK IN ROCHESTER, NY

At First Universalist Church in Rochester, we try to make the goal of SGM as a way to make connections within the congregation -- the kinds of connections that are different from those connections made within committees for a specific project. Our SGM is used for nurturing the spirit. The airline attendant instructs passengers in the event of a lack of oxygen in the cabin, to first attend to the self, and then to others. I think that SGM is like this. It nurtures the spirit so that one can then attend to the needs of the community and beyond. I do think, though, that coherent SGM groups can evolve into something more. A few years ago, one of ours evolved into a group that assisted one of its participants through hospice. This was a unique experience for the group, that made it go beyond its SGM discussions. This has made me think that social justice issues need to be major topics within SGM, so that the ideas sparked in intimate discussions can be springboards for subsequent group work on social justice issues through other than SGM venues. Our topics at SGM often seem to be simplistic and not too mind-stretching -- "What's on Your Bucket List?" was a recent one. As a facilitator I will aspire to raise the discussion to a higher level, hopefully inspiring myself and others to action. Connie Valk