

## **Small Group Ministry Service Ventures: Congregation & Community**

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*SGM Quarterly*, Spring 2010

Circle Ministry (CM), the name given to Small Group Ministry at First Parish Unitarian Universalist in Cohasset, MA, is in its fourth year, with six groups and 53 participants. It has become a strong and healthy heartbeat in the soul of this congregation.

Five years ago, we researched best practices in UU congregations across the country. One such practice that came to light was that of service ventures. How easy it is for small groups to become cliques. How easy it is for any group to lose a sense of larger community and the accountability that accompanies it. How to prevent this?

We prepared a Behavioral Covenant template for each group to use as a launching pad for its own Behavioral Covenant, understanding that the core elements would be common to all groups. These elements included: logistical; respect for one another's time; commitment to attend; sharing "airtime;" general respect (e.g. speaking from one's own experience, no advice giving); and service to others.

Red flags went up at "service to others". Comments of resistance ranged from "I'm so busy!" to "I thought the focus was on this group!" to "We already do so much *for* the church." Our prepared responses included: "We're all busy, this group operates in a larger frame, and no, this is not just about us!" A few moans and groans were heard before the brainstorming began: one venture serving the congregation, and one venture serving the larger community.

Surprise! As group members planned and implemented, they began to experience a deeper bonding with one another and a deeper connection with the congregation. In the early years, the congregationally focused initiatives took the form of hosting breakfasts, a plant sale, and an evening of

sharing treasured letters and desserts. Community focused ventures took the form of preparing lunch for a nearby center serving the economically challenged, transporting goods to a food pantry; preparing a meal for folks coping with cancer, and collecting clothing for wounded military personnel returning from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Enthusiasm and delight replaced moans and groans. From year to year, these ventures have become ever more creative, with energy levels to match. A clean-up/fix-up Sunday was the choice of two of the groups for a congregational venture. Another group hosted an "Afternoon of Discovery," with members and friends participating in a "show & tell" of leisure-time interests and activities that many knew nothing about! For community-gearred ventures, one group arranged with a local supermarket to hand to shoppers printed requests with items needed by the local food pantry. Items were collected and delivered by group members. This past year, the same group joined forces with another group and tapped the willingness of two supermarkets to participate. The harvest was 150 boxes of needed food items delivered to two nearby food pantries! Other projects included a day with Habitat for Humanity, planting window boxes for the Community Center, and a day of volunteering at a local organic farm/education center. Giving and receiving have become indistinguishable as the circles defining Circle Ministry expand through heart and hand.

What is Circle Ministry about? Service is one of the answers. Our CM handbook says more:

"As human beings we seek to be of use and benefit to others. A healthy Unitarian Universalist congregation with the vision of religious liberalism needs to provide avenues through which we can live out our faith in

service, justice making, and social witness. Small group ministry helps to energize a congregation's social action by including in the group covenant an expectation of service to the congregation and the larger community."

The gift of a small group—increasingly skilled in deep listening, mutual respect, and service to others—is a gift given and received.

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-Taken from the Small Group Ministry  
Network Quarterly, Spring 2010