

## ***From Our Members.....***

### **Dream versus Reality**

*By Lyssa Andersson, Unitarian Universalist Church of Greater Lynn  
Swampscott, Massachusetts*

"Covenanted small groups are life-changing for a congregation." This is how I felt ten years ago when I was first made aware of the concept. I wanted this for my congregation; I wanted this for me. For five more years, those of us who experienced the introductory SGM workshop were still too busy with our other congregation-based interests to really take the reins of small group ministry development. Finally, I realized it was up to me, and so I began. And then there were two; another church member signed on with me and we moved forward. Over the next year, we recruited three more, and we had the critical mass to really do this. We were all believers that "Covenanted small groups are lifechanging for a congregation."

We planned and strategized, wanting to make our covenant groups as close to the model as possible. Bob Hill's book, *The Complete Guide to Small Group Ministry: Saving the World Ten at a Time*, was our Bible. We had a dream of groups multiplying year-to-year, with coordinated sessions and simple logistics, with satisfaction and spontaneous spiritual growth among the group members as covenant groups became the heart of our congregation's culture. Did that happen right away? No, of course not. Did we accomplish our dream? Yes we did; we had covenant groups! Only two groups, yes, but *we had two groups...and*, "Covenanted small groups are life-changing for a congregation."

During our first year, one group member struggled with the contemplation of divorce or relocation; one nearly lost a grandchild to cancer; one found love (but with someone far away); one found a way to speak for the first time about serious family issues; one returned to the church building for the first time since disaffection a decade before; one dared to contemplate entering the ministry; one came to grips with the fear of dementia with aging; and on and on. Could these events have occurred without small group ministry? Of course. Could anything have replaced the support and non-judgmental presence of the covenant group? "Covenanted small groups are life-changing for a congregation."

As coordinator (now retired), implementation team and facilitators, we made a lot of good decisions. We also made mistakes. When the facilitator of one group dropped out, it was almost impossible to place the group members in another group, because they had become a clique instead of a covenant group. We "relaxed" our expectations of attendance for the summer, and had a difficult time getting things moving again in the fall. We sent out luscious invitations to the congregation at regular intervals to enhance our membership, and got very little response. We didn't insist on facilitators meeting regularly among themselves. We expanded into three groups, but were not able to sustain the membership, and went back to two. But along with our mistaken moves, we held true to our original dream, and little by little, our ranks have expanded, our place in the church culture is solid, and satisfaction and spontaneous spiritual growth among our members is a reality. "Covenanted small groups are life-changing for a congregation."

-Taken from the Small Group Ministry Network Quarterly, Spring 2011