

From Our Members.....

Finding the Heart of Small Group Ministry

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Several years ago we sought to revitalize Small Group Ministry at First Parish in Cambridge as some of the groups had become "closed" and most had disbanded. We decided to adopt a more formal model to take us in new directions.

Our planning team met monthly to think through every aspect of the program we call Covenant Groups. Initially we tried a small pilot program, and in three years have grown to seven groups of 9-11 participants. Yet we still had groups fail or lose many members. By the end of spring 2010, our team was exhausted by nearly constant work, and we decided to take a "time out".

We were encouraged in this decision by our newly-called Associate Minister, Rev. Lilia Cuervo. Rev. Cuervo had been instrumental in the building of the SGM program at San Jose UU Church in California, a program we knew to be rich and thriving. We wanted to learn from her perspective and experience; we desperately needed to go beyond the administrative details to the heart of SGM.

Rev. Cuervo and our Senior Minister, Rev. Fred Small, led us in an expanded facilitator training in September, focused on the spiritual components we felt were vital to Covenant Groups. In October we had our first retreat, a growth experience for all of us—in our relationships with each other, with the program, and with our own concepts of ministry.

Our first step was to eliminate the planning team, a small group managing publicity, registration, session writing, and service projects. Instead, all the facilitators now share these vital administrative tasks. Next we spent time examining the San Jose' model and our own program design. We also incorporated some of its ritual and liturgical elements into the conversational space we had already created for a blend that is appropriate for our New England setting and culture.

Feedback from program evaluations and personal conversations showed that in the groups that had failed, we had not properly conveyed or developed a sense of commitment to process and program. We heard time and again from these participants that their goal was to "make friends" or have "discussions." Alternatively, in the groups that succeeded, participants understood that Covenant Groups were sacred spaces of their own making in which they could be truly heard and accepted, and where they could practice hearing and accepting without the need to fix or advise. Their goal was *spiritual growth*.

We changed our language, in person and in our promotional materials, to emphasize spiritual over social growth. We adopted the San Jose's model of "preliminaries" as a teaching tool to convey the

mission and culture of small group ministry more effectively. We also incorporated some of its ritual and liturgical elements into the conversational space we had already created for a blend that is appropriate for our New England setting and culture. Rev. Cuervo has consistently brought more spirituality to our monthly meetings with body prayers, meditations, and beautiful altars, reminding us that our committee meetings should embody ministry.

We launched our new program in January 2011 with a renewed sense of purpose, ready to reap the abundant rewards that our Covenant Groups continue to provide.

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