

Minister's Page
James Freeman Clarke and the Legacy of Small Group Ministry
By Reverend Paul Johnson
Unitarian Universalist Congregation at Shelter Rock, Manhasset, New York

After serving seven years as minister of the Unitarian Church in Louisville, Rev. James Freeman Clarke (1810-1888), gathered a new congregation in Boston. On April 27, 1841, 46 charter members signed the membership book underneath this covenant: "Our faith is in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and we do hereby unite ourselves into a Church of the Disciples, that we may co-operate together in the study and practice of Christianity."

The new congregation was committed to three guidelines suggested by Clarke: the social principle, voluntary financial contribution rather than sale of pews, and congregational participation in worship. The first of these might well be considered a forerunner of the Small Group Ministry movement. Clarke believed that their covenant required them to know each other better than they would if they only met for worship on Sunday mornings and so he organized other sorts of social gatherings to engage three elements of human nature— intellect, affection, and will.

Every other Wednesday evening, a discussion was held in the homes of members to engage the intellect. Among the topics discussed were these:

1. There is no instinctive, intuitive, or direct knowledge of the truths of religion, either of the being of God or of our own immortality.
2. Is sin a negative or a positive evil?
3. Shall we maintain and urge our opinions always, or sometimes concede for the sake of union?
4. What is the sphere of woman, and how shall she be best educated to fill it?
5. What are the principles and ideas peculiar to Protestantism, as distinguished from those peculiar to the Church of Rome?
6. What is needed by Unitarianism, at the present time, to give it greater influence and success?

A lecture series on Sunday evenings included Temperance Reform, The Peace Movement, the Anti-Slavery Movement, and Education. Wednesday evening meetings at the church were intended to engage the heart rather than the intellect. Clarke described them as follows: "At these prayer meetings, and conference meetings, where we endeavor to speak from our inward experience, rather than from our reflections, a holy influence often seems to extend itself, as one speaker after another, in a few simple words, unfolds his deep convictions and trials, joys, and hopes.

Bible study groups, led by Deacon Herbert, engaged intellect and emotion with topics such as "The Aim of Life," "Nicodemus and the New Birth," "Miracles," "The Twelve," and "The Sermon on the Mount." Each person's thinking and experience, including that of the leader and minister, were brought to bear on the topic under discussion. The result was a group understanding superior to that of any individual. This "polylogue," an interesting and entertaining way to elucidate a subject, very much demonstrated Clarke's approach to learning. Everyone had something to offer and enriched the understanding of the group.

A third class of meetings, designed to enable the exercise of the will, involved more practical effort. For instance, women of the church met on two afternoons every week during the winter to cut out material to be given to poor women to make clothes for their children.

The exercise of the will engendered by the meetings and lectures led the congregation to establish these benevolent programs: a temporary home for the destitute, a retirement home for African American women who had worked as domestics, a home for pregnant unmarried women, and significant financial and volunteer support for the New England Hospital for Women and Children.

During the 47 years Clarke served the congregation, it steadily grew in membership. The final building during Clarke's tenure was dedicated debt-free on February 18, 1869. Built at a cost of \$70,000, it seated 1500 people and was a fulfillment of Clarke's dreams. All of his basic congregational theories, including the social principle, remained intact. Sunday attendance often exceeded 800, and on occasion the sanctuary was filled to capacity. Membership reached 598 in 1871.

Clarke's theology drew upon a very broad epistemology. As he phrased it: "The Bible, human history, the soul itself, Christian experience, reason--all are sources of Christian knowledge, but none are infallible, nor were meant to be." Clarke firmly believed, in line with his social principle, that a congregational dialogue is possible which uses all of these means of religious knowledge. "The union of many minds in the earnest investigation of truth, will produce deeper and broader results, than the solitary efforts of any individual mind, no matter how superior he is to each of them. The only way in which every side of a truth can be seen is in the combined investigations of many different intellects. Their varied tendencies of thought, their diverse experience, modify and correct all individual one-sidedness and eccentricity."

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