

Giving Life the Shape of Justice: Small Group Ministry as Missional Religious Community

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“Sunday morning is the show,
small groups are the church!”

These words are from Rick Warren, the minister of one of the largest evangelical megachurches in the country. And although I would tend to see many things differently than he, I wholeheartedly agree with this particular sentiment. What is the work of the church, the fellowship, the congregation? I push against what is referred to as “the primacy of worship.” When we think of “church” in the common sense, our minds tend to go immediately to Sunday morning worship. But is this truly the only place—or even the primary place—that our congregations impact our lives...not to mention the world? Perhaps we can consider the primacy of the lives we live and how our faith informs them, or, perhaps, the primacy of the small group.

I lead a fledgling but rapidly growing *missional community* in North Carolina called Mutual Aid Carrboro. We are an alternate model of religious community for folks who want to be in covenant with us and our work but aren't particularly interested in the traditional congregation. Being *missional* means that our approach is one of “going to them,” which differs from the “build it and they will come” or *attractional* model that most of our congregations function from. Our work here in NC is to grow a deliberate community from which to act for justice in the world.

Why is this relevant to small group ministry? Because our model—a model common to missional communities in other faiths—is based on small group ministry. Instead of joining the organization as a whole, to be part of Mutual Aid Carrboro one joins a small group! Imagine if, when you signed the member book in your congregation, you are at the same time joining a covenant group. Imagine that being part-and-parcel with your membership, contribution, and participation in your faith community.

The strengths of religious-community-as-small-group ministry are many and varied. SGM Journal readers will likely be familiar with the growth in relational intimacy gained through participation in small groups, especially within large congregations. Many of us have come to know that *depth* in our UU faith is often found most markedly in those shared moments in our covenant groups. One way of looking at this is a phrase that comes from those of a missional mindset, and that is “to grow smaller in order to do bigger things.”

The church consultant guru Lorne Meade talks about the different types of growth in congregations. There is numerical growth, of course, but there is also spiritual growth (depth of faith), relational growth (our interdependence), and incarnational growth (our capacity to transform the world). My belief is that these latter three areas of growth are best achieved through small groups, and that is what we focus on here in Carrboro.

We are guided by the Sacred Fire curriculum which I began developing while in seminary at Meadville Lombard. It starts with a UU theology of social justice and progresses through commensurate ethics and processes of social change that those theological convictions call for. The content draws both from our own liberal theological tradition and from the tradition of liberation theology of Latin America. Our

small group sessions center around themes of the co-creation of meaning, anti-oppression work, how to be in solidarity with other communities, and building viable alternatives to what currently exists in our society. Our outward projects take the form of social justice work and are ongoing in the community. We practice ethical consumption, we distribute food to families in need, we have helped to form a tenants' empowerment organization, and have organized three OWL training for our cluster congregations and community partner organizations. We have plans to become more involved with living wage campaigns and much more!

The power of this model is in the impact it has on our day-to-day lives. Because most of us are young adults and tend to have odd and differing work schedules, we have found the small group model to be the one that holds the most accessibility for us, where Sunday mornings often did not. In fact, when we began, most of us worked in the food service industry, which means late Saturday nights and early Sunday brunches! That, along with our thirst for depth, helped lead us to this model. We have found small group ministry to be a wonderful vehicle for making religion or faith, as we say, *coincident with life*. Through our model, we have come to apply our life narrative of justice and interdependence to the places we live, to how we eat, and to how we work. Trust me, you need to get in on this!

For us, "church" is Monday through Saturday. Sunday is when we celebrate!

To learn more about our missional community and our social justice work, visit our website at www.sacredfireuu.org, or contact us at mutualaidcarrboro@gmail.com.

-Taken from the Small Group Ministry Network Journal, Spring 2014