

Bringing Small Group Ministry Out Into the World

Rev. Dr. M'ellen Kennedy submitted an application for a workshop at GA 2015 that provides a proactive direction for Small Group Ministry. We would like to thank those involved with the proposal, which is the basis for this article: Rev. Dr. M'ellen Kennedy, Denise Davidoff, Douglas Jones, along with Rev. Jan Carlsson-Bull, Susan Stukey, and Rev. Helen Zidowecki.

In our contemporary American society, many folks are profoundly hungry for an opportunity for community and deep spiritual conversations, yet they are not able to or are not interested in attending Sunday morning worship and are unlikely to step through the doors of our congregations. We can bring the opportunity for community and spiritual growth through covenant groups or small group ministry out into the community!

One of the most important activities that transpires in covenant groups is that participants tell their stories. American poet and political activist Muriel Rukeyser says, "The world is made of stories, not atoms." The telling and shaping of stories is how we make meaning. Covenant groups create, with intentionality and care, the sacred vessel for the telling of and hearing of these stories. By engaging in the process of speaking and listening deeply, we become different people—more connected, more whole, more empowered, more of who we really are.

By offering these powerful small groups in varied settings, we are reaching very diverse demographic groups, including seniors in retirement homes, students on college campuses, folks labeled with mental illness, people in prisons or jails, and those attending trainings for cross-cultural understanding. The foundational components of small group ministry are focused on creating a respectful, non-coercive, welcoming environment for all participants. These foundational aspects of covenant groups include clear purpose, format, and ground rules or relational agreements.

Partnership is the essence of this endeavor. Imagine congregations partnering with new applications for covenant groups in the community. Rev. Dr. M'ellen Kennedy conducts small group ministry facilitator trainings all across the country and has made an interesting observation. Many of our congregations have had small group ministry for a decade or more and thus have cadres of seasoned, savvy facilitators. They love small group ministry and are eager for some new challenge, but they don't know what that might be. They respond with enthusiasm to the idea of building a relationship with an organization or institution outside of the congregation and beginning to offer a covenant group there. Many of the leaders in our congregations are ready for this.

The goals of covenant groups are Intimacy and Ultimacy or Friendship and Spiritual Growth. The fact that spirituality is at the heart of covenant groups is what makes them so powerful and compelling. People in institutions such as mental health facilities or prisons are often isolated, forgotten, and underserved. They have profound needs for friendship and spiritual exploration that are not being met. When we bring covenant groups to these diverse settings, we are making significant steps toward bringing a message of hope, love, and inclusion. We are affirming their inherent worth and dignity. From the Christian roots of our movement these words resonate from Matthew 25:35-36: "For I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you took me in; I was naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you visited me; I was in prison and you came to

me.”

The UU Small Group Ministry Network is eager to move this concept forward. Please visit us at the UUSGM Network Booth #214 at General Assembly. Join us for discussions and interviews, share information about your experiences, and raise questions and possibilities.

You are also welcome to send information to office@smallgroupministry.net. Describe for us:

- Your covenant group setting beyond the congregation
- The transforming power of Small Group Ministry in this setting
- The challenges and rewards of SGM in this setting
- The congregational connection. Is this outreach a service component or an ongoing group of the congregation?

We look forward to your joining this venture!

-Taken from the Small Group Ministry Network Journal, Spring 2015