

Going Deeper with Theme-Based Ministry

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First Unitarian Universalist Church of Winnipeg, in Manitoba, Canada, has been practicing small group ministry (SGM) since 2002, and part of the SGM Network since 2010. We began with Chalice Circles, groups of six to twelve people who gathered monthly to discuss their thoughts on a topic of the group's choosing. In our culture these have been ongoing groups, with a depth of trust and intimacy that comes from years together. While our current Chalice Circles share common elements (deep check-ins, conversation around a topic, service to the church and wider community) and have been supported by the minister and/or a volunteer, they are disconnected from each other and do not follow a particular program.

Early in 2013, in post-worship discussions and other conversations, we began to hear congregants express a desire to "go deeper" into concepts and questions raised in sermons. Our minister, Rev. Millie Rochester, also longed to be able to explore topics more fully and with more depth than one service a year could afford. So by the 2013-14 church year we embarked on thematic worship.

Themes were assigned to each month from September through June (Unity, Gratitude, Vocation, Stillness, Letting Go, Renewal, Abundance, Hope, Truth, and Joy) and most worship services focused on some element of the theme. Even during the minister's sabbatical, guest speakers were informed of the monthly theme and encouraged to participate.

Then in May 2014 the minister and I (the religious educator) attended a day-long workshop on Theme-Based Ministry, led by Rev. Scott Tayler, a co-developer of the *Soul Matters Sharing Circle* approach to small group ministry. Rev. Tayler also joined the Unitarian Universalist Ministers of Canada during their annual gathering and the result was that many Canadian churches adopted this model, including First Winnipeg.

The *Soul Matters Sharing Circle* comprises a group of religious professionals from over 70 congregations across the continent. Many share resources in real time: offering readings, lesson plans, sermons and music ideas, stories and more, co-creating a small-group packet to be shared in their congregations the following month. Although we joined the Soul Matters group, we decided to dip our toes into this new model by using archived packets. We adapt previously published packets adding a letter from our minister, Canadian content (and spelling), newer resources, a Pinterest board related to each theme, and a section aimed at families. Because we aren't using the same themes as the "real time" Soul Matters churches, and because our packets are adapted, we chose a new name for our program: Kaleidoscope. Each month we consider how we are inspired to embody a particular value as Unitarian Universalists. We asked ourselves, *What does it mean to live a life of...?* Hospitality, Deep Listening, Memory, Compassion, Possibility, Curiosity, Devotion, Creativity, Courage, and Play.

We see Theme-Based Ministry as a comprehensive program that includes worship, curated resources, deepening exercises, small group ministry, and worship circles for children and youth. Congregants may engage through different access points and to varying degrees. Some may choose to attend services, peruse the packet and do the deepening exercises. Others might delve further into some of the resources, watching YouTube videos or movies, reading books, or listening to podcasts recommended in the packet. And others still will do some or all of this, and then meet in a Kaleidoscope Group to

discuss their experiences.

Group members are asked to read the packet, do one of two deepening exercises, and explore one of our "Questions to Live With." They receive their packet about a week prior to a new month and have three to four weeks of personal exploration and reflection, as well as sermons on the theme, before meeting with their group. We begin our groups with a brief check-in, sharing something that has lifted up or is pulling on our spirits. Each member shares their *experience* of "living a life of [the monthly theme]." While we practice listening without interrupting, the group also has an opportunity to discuss similarities and/or learn from each others experiences.

The key differences between our Chalice Circle model of small group ministry, and the Theme-Based Ministry model are

- ➔ Kaleidoscope Groups are part of a larger program, whereas Chalice Circles stand alone
- ➔ Kaleidoscope Groups discuss their experience of living with, or embodying the theme, whereas Chalice Circles tend to discuss members' thoughts about a topic.
- ➔ Kaleidoscope Groups are provided with a curated packet of resources, while Chalice Circles may or may not provide anything prior to a gathering.
- ➔ Members of Kaleidoscope Groups are all doing the same theme each month. This allows them to have discussions beyond their group, because everyone in the church has access to the packet.

Feedback from our first year has been very positive. We had one existing Chalice Circle embrace the new model and two brand new Kaleidoscope Groups. By the end of the year, some Chalice Circles were enjoying using the packets as well, although they retained their individual formats.

Although we face some unknown factors as our minister retires in July, we look forward to the possibility of diving into theme-based ministry again in the future.

For more information on the Soul Matters Sharing Circle, see soulmatterssharingcircle.com. To learn more about the Kaleidoscope Program at First Unitarian Universalist Church of Winnipeg, visit uuwinnipeg.mb.ca. Andrea James has served First Winnipeg as their religious educator since 2008.

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