

Small Group Ministry: A Living Covenant

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Just as we refer to our faith as a living tradition, so might we refer to our ministry of small groups as a living covenant. From congregation to congregation, from group to group, we form behavioral covenants, most likely from a suggested template, that ground the integrity of our relationships in small groups. Sometimes it would be easier to be creedal —“This is the law! Just do it!” Yet I would not trade for anything a faith community that is grounded in covenant for one bound by creeds. Relationships are contextual. Covenants are relational. In forging and practicing covenants, we cultivate a reverence for community. In Small Group Ministry, we cultivate a reverence for community in the form of a small group. Reverence is not adoration, but respect, mindfulness, thoughtfulness, and caring. Ergo, it’s “perfection minus more than one.”

As Small Group Ministry continues to unfold at the UU Church in Meriden, CT, we have sought to shape it as fluid and to respond to the input of participants and facilitators, not just at the season’s end potluck/assessment, but throughout the months of sessions happening. This includes our facilitator-specific sessions. My earlier articles published in this journal focused on “Resurrecting SGM” in this congregation. The first honed in on “A Story Unfolding,” the second, on “The Story Continues.” Here I offer thoughts about the fluidity of a congregation-specific ministry of small groups.

Last year we strived to have three groups. Numbers loomed too large as we planned for more groups than there were participants wholly committed to being there. Remember that 80% (and probably more) of success is showing up. This year we were more modest. Better to have two groups, even if 12 or more people register for each group, than to count on everyone who registers honoring all-out commitment to being there. This has worked well. On a couple of occasions one of the groups greeted 16 participants. Whoo! But the co-facilitators reported a lively dynamic and healthy participation. Kind of like lunchtime at a New York deli I thought, but I’ll take their word for it.

Our basic structure is a Coordinating Team that includes our DRE, two lay leaders, and me as minister. Each of these persons except me is also a co-facilitator. One additional person serves as a co-facilitator. Rather than abide by what I understood as the requisite frequency of facilitators meeting once a month, they pushed back and it’s been closer to every six weeks. I plan and lead the sessions with their input. We have also been mindful of appending each meeting with a mini-SGM session just for the facilitators. They need and cherish their time to be simply participants.

Responsiveness on the part of facilitators and participants has allowed a year of SGM that has flowed well, though we started the process later than we had hoped. This reality was further complicated by Mama Nature, who had just a few wintry temper tantrums here in the Northeast.

As a collary to each group’s Behavioral Covenant, a prime innovation this year was the crafting of a Facilitators’ Covenant. As in our groups, it provides needed grounding when dynamics go awry. The covenant is presented here to use as your own Small Group Ministry evolves.

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