

Weathering Change Through Small Group Ministry

By Reverend Robin Tanner

Piedmont Unitarian Universalist Church, Charlotte, North Carolina

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Nearly a year ago our congregation, the Piedmont Unitarian Universalist Church, was growing at about 34%. Sundays were packed, but not many people knew each other as they looked out across the sanctuary. Longtime lay leaders were wondering how they were going to meet all these new people and the Membership Council was wondering how they would connect so many new members to other people. After some consideration, lots of conversations with congregational consultants and lay leaders, the answer seemed right in front of us: Small Group Ministry.

Within weeks of making the decision, we discovered we had a trained facilitator among our lay leaders. Together, the two of us selected six other lay leaders that we thought demonstrated skills with empathic listening, group facilitation and interest in building relationships. We sent a letter to each person detailing the skills we thought they would bring to our program. By the springtime, we had built a team and brought in a Small Group Ministry trainer. After a trial with a few groups, by fall we launched our full program called Chalice Circles. Each group has 7-10 members, meets monthly and follows our congregation's theme-based calendar. Nearly one in three members is now in a Chalice Circle.

In the last nine months, our small congregation has undergone some mighty changes. We went from one service to two services, continued growing, put together a long-range planning team, and it seems we changed nearly every council and committee in some way. Yet, our members are better connected now than ever before. Pastoral care requests have gone down from about twelve hours a week to three hours. We've raised our pledges. Members, even in the challenge of two services, are meeting each other. We are better connected because of Small Group Ministry. We are learning how to be together as a congregation

in a new way with new faces and new stories to share. We have our challenges for sure, but thanks to our Chalice Circles we have a way forward through those challenges: together.

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