

## **The Impact of Small Group Ministry - Responses to 3 Questions – Facilitator at Eno River UU Fellowship, Durham, NC**

### *1. What difference has your covenant group made in your life?*

My covenant group experiences have motivated me to think about – and reflect upon – my faith more often and more intentionally.

This might sound small or subtle, but, in my life, it actually turns out to be important, powerful, and sometimes dramatic. My covenant group experience has given me practice in both listening and sharing in deeper ways; this has led to experiencing deeper connections with all kinds of people – and not just those in my small group. This has spilled out naturally (and sometimes unexpectedly) in how I relate to those in our larger UU fellowship community and beyond.

I would say my covenant group experiences have made me more intentional about how I am living my life... and more self-aware of my core beliefs, and my own behaviors. I am finding that I am connecting more authentically – and often in deeper ways – to all those around me, whether it be friend, family or even stranger.

### *2. What differences personally and communally have you experienced through small group ministry that couldn't have happened in any other way?*

I don't relate to the phrase "that couldn't have happened in any other way." But I can say that my covenant group experiences have offered me opportunities to move forward spiritually in faster – and more dramatic ways – than otherwise. Specifically:

- I have a sharper personal focus on what's important to me. This helps me in my day-by-day existence with the decisions I make. It has also helped me let go of a lot of things that I now realize are not important and have tended to bog me down or distract me from my real priorities. Finally, I have become more self-aware – which, in some mysterious way, has helped make me more consciously – and routinely – grateful for so many things in my life, on a daily basis. My altered relationship to 'gratitude' has unexpectedly impacted my life in a positive way – to the point where I have recently concluded that practicing gratitude is one of those few, precious 'secret ingredients' to finding some happiness in this life.

- Changes in me, communally, might best be viewed simply as natural extensions of the personal changes I just described. With a clearer focus on what's important to me and with a more deliberate intentionality with which I now try to approach my everyday life, I find that I can let go of lots of stuff... so that my ego and my appetites for all kinds of things are easier to manage – making me a bit more effective and, I hope, a little less strident. I'm better able now to say 'no' more cheerfully to requests and opportunities that I don't see as important... and to say 'yes' with more passion and commitment when I find something meaningful. This makes me happier and, I believe, a more positive and enthusiastic contributor to the different communities to which I belong.

### *3. What difference does your covenant group program make in your congregation?*

I see the covenant group program as having the potential to be the foundation block for all that happens within a congregation – especially a large congregation like ours. Covenant groups provide a precious real-life opportunity, within the church/fellowship structure, for congregants to find what so many are hungry for: feeling connected to others and finding support for living a more spiritually focused, intentional life.

In my congregation, covenant groups are slowly growing and, at their best, are providing models and clues for how to make – and keep – our large congregation personal, nurturing, and more

intimately interconnected than happens randomly – even with the wonderful people who comprise our congregation. We're not there yet, but the word is spreading. Yet, it's slow because it's a case of 'a picture truly worth a thousand words' – perhaps more than a thousand words in this case... because hearing about the value of covenant groups seems to never do justice to the actual covenant group experience, at least when a group is well functioning.

And, as we're finding out, even when covenant groups run into trouble – or have difficulty understanding and executing... or even grasping – the spirit of this ministry, we – the covenant group leadership – have been provided valuable 'teachable moments' to raise the consciousnesses of those engaged in this process. So even in its imperfections, our covenant group ministry is giving us opportunities that would not otherwise exist... opportunities for helping our many congregants stretch, and grow, and move forward in the process of becoming our best selves. Yes, we are a work in progress, but we're moving in the right direction.