

TRANSFORMING RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

By the Rev. Helen Zidowecki

The Rev. Helen Zidowecki is Religious Education Consultant for the Northeast District. She is involved with small group ministry in her home church in Augusta, Maine, where the Rev. Calvin Dame is minister, and in her work with the District's Extension Committee. Helen and Calvin will lead a workshop at Star Island RE Week this summer, including these small-group concepts, both in general and as they may be applied to religious education and youth/young adult programming.

Small Group Ministry has the potential to transform the educational ministry of the church! The practice of Small Group Ministry or Covenant Groups needs to include all ages and be part of ongoing religious education. We intentionally focus on community: we educate relationally. If a sense of community is essential for adults, a sense of community should be part of "raising up" our children.

A number of the principles inherent in the small-group concept can be introduced into Religious Education. It is important that we consider this, as we are changing the culture of our congregations to caring communities.

This discussion considers "relational religious education". Education in a religious community is preparing for, setting the stage for, celebrating the teachable moment, the moment of connection:

- Connection of children, youth and adults.
- Connections of what we are learning intellectually and what we understand with our hearts.
- Connection of our own life experiences and the ongoing spiritual journeys of others

IDENTIFYING IN STAGES

Children -- and actually all of us -- identify with a church in stages. First we identify with the people in the church -- so that the relational component is key. Then there is the identity with the place -- the surroundings, the sense of it being "their church." This is followed by name recognition and the meanings and learnings that accompany that recognition.

How we "do church" is important. Three components to this "doing church" are worship or celebration, community, and our personal growth. If we find only one of these in a church, and not the others, we probably will not keep coming back.

Learning needs to occur within "community" -- the second part of "doing church". ... Small groups ministry acknowledges that we connect on a personal level better with small groups. The suggested maximum size, as suggested both by Covenant Group literature and our experience in the Northeast District, is 8-10, including the facilitators. When the number of participants exceeds this size, a new group needs to be started in order to preserve the relational aspect.

The recommended Covenant Group format essentially is:

1. A few minutes of greetings and getting situated.

2. A chalice lighting and a short reading.
3. Sharing what is going on in your life. Allow everyone an opportunity to speak, without interruption.
4. The facilitator introduces a spiritual topic. The group then discusses this topic.
5. A quick sharing of what people liked about the meeting and what they wish it could have been (just sharing, no discussion of ideas).
6. A closing reading.

[Editor's Note: Helen suggest that, while Shared Ministry or Covenant Group meetings of parents are happening, parallel groups for their children could be in progress as well.]

The same principles that apply to the adults can apply to children. The additional factor here is involving the "child care provider" with the basic principles of the program, and providing resources to carry that out.

FOCUS: PERSONAL EXPLORATION

A set of pages for children could be developed to parallel those for adults, with additional activities. These could follow the same themes as the adult discussions, with additional sessions available if adults spend more time on a topic than the children might.

- The focus would be personal explorations rather than a curriculum per se.
- The material would need to be developed for multiple ages.
- The inclusion of children in Small Group Ministry and the topics that are presented could be communicated to the Religious Education Director or Coordinator.

Probably not all of the children in the religious education program are going to be included in the small group ministry, but an understanding of what has been discussed in either area may influence and complement the other.

When both parents and children are meeting at the same site, a variation of this might be to have some of the time, such as a brief check-in, as intergenerational.

Considering that the sessions tend to last for 1 1/2 to 2 hours, alternative activities for the children need to be considered, at least for part of the time. However, a small group might plan some sessions that were specifically intergenerational in focus, including activities such as a potluck meal or a hiking trip.

Regardless of the arrangements made with the children during the small group meeting, parents' discussion of the importance of small group ministry will provide a way for children to understand that the connection to the church community is more than the Sunday service.

Actually, the difference between the small group ministry sessions and religious education sessions may be the amount of new information that is included! Both are relational, both provide opportunity for personal growth and understanding. There are plenty of materials, curriculum, and methods for implementing religious education, based on the premise of relations.

These are only some of the ideas for application of Small Group Ministry to all ages and to the educational ministry of congregations. Other explorations underway include the impact of Small Group Ministry on religious education, and Small Group Ministry for youth in congregations and district conferences. Suggestions, dialogue, and comments are welcome.

-- The Rev. Helen Zidowecki

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