

Varieties of Church Experience -- A General Assembly 2000 Report

Bob Hill, *Covenant Group News*, July 20, 2000

The meta-church movement within the UUA is launched. The Covenant Group genie is out of the bottle and General Assembly 2000 in Nashville gave ample evidence of that.

A year earlier, the Southwest District had sponsored a GA event promoting the use of small group organization for our churches and it drew about 200 people. This year, the Northeast District sponsored a similar event led by the Rev. Calvin Dame of Augusta, ME, and members of his congregation, and even greater numbers came, over-flowing its meeting room.

In addition, retiring Northeast District Minister Glenn Turner, Meadville-Lombard Professor Thandeka, and I presented a Minister's Day workshop to UUMA members, assisted by several of our colleagues who are using Covenant Groups as a means of sharing ministry in their churches. The workshop drew a nearly full house and enthusiasm was high.

A non-GA event sponsored by the Center for Community Values in a nearby church basement drew about 200 people who heard Thandeka, CCV president, declare the launching of the Covenant Group movement as such. The Rev. Brent Smith closed the session by asking for donations and pledges to help further the spread of this radically different way of doing church and ministry, and several hundreds of dollars, along with commitments for action, came in from participants.

Churches from both coasts and regions in between are pursuing the change in organizational focus which Covenant (or meta-church) Groups are. This is a grassroots movement growing out of felt needs which our churches can satisfy. Through Covenant Groups, professional and lay church leaders are realizing, we can

create the conditions in which our visitors and our long-time members may find friendship and inspiration (intimacy and ultimacy, if you prefer), thereby satisfying the needs that brought them through our doors to begin with.

PLAIN, SIMPLE AND PROFOUND

So I cannot imagine that anything can stop our exploration of this old/new church organization involving (a) groups of about 10 people meeting in homes regularly with (b) a facilitator carefully selected and trained to lead folks through (c) a format that begins with a check-in, a reading from a recognized Unitarian Universalist source and ending with another reading and a check-out.

The "plain, simple, and profound" minimum requirements for a Covenant Group also call for (d) an agreement (covenant) among the members about how they will function together as a group and (e) how they will serve their church at least once a year. The last and, for some the toughest, requirement in the Covenant Group definition is (f) that the groups welcome new members and spin off a new group once their numbers reach 10 or 12.

As with the Methodists who used similar small groups to spread their faith like wildfire across this continent in the early days of our country, Covenant Groups tend to the well-being of group members. This is shared ministry, which is why facilitators must be chosen by the senior minister in congregations that have ministers; he or she must share the ministry of the church with the facilitators. Once these fundamental conditions are met, the focus of the Covenant Group is up to its members.

Already, though, at least three recognizable variations on the basic model of Covenant

Groups (by whatever name) have grown up among us. This, too, was obvious at GA this year.

THE ROOTS AND BRANCHES MODEL

Brent Smith developed “Roots and Branches” at Tulsa (OK) All Souls after studying meta-church techniques of traditional Christian congregations. This model begins with four sessions of studying the history and heritage of our religion and of the local church. This “Roots” part is, essentially, classroom work led by ministers, usually, but afterward members are invited to form small groups and continue meeting as “Branches” groups.

The Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge is using this approach and recently quoted Brent’s 1999 *Covenant Group News* article in their newsletter: “Each small group has a leader (trained by clergy), an assistant leader (mentored by leader), a hospitality person, a “missionary” (selected to start a new group), and some have additional roles... Each ... develops a group covenant from resources provided by the minister.”

THE AUGUSTA MODEL

Inspired by Glenn Turner, the Rev. Calvin Dame and members of his Augusta, ME, congregation launched their small-group program in April, 1999. Their model follows the basics described above and includes these unique elements:

*The minister provides each facilitator with a loose-leaf binder containing a couple of dozen lesson plans he has prepared.

*The minister assigns to the groups new people who want to become involved.

*The Augusta folk prefer the name “Small Group Ministries,” having recognized that these groups would “form the framework in which (they) could reach out to one another in caring and support, (and) be present in each others’ lives in the forms that describe ministry.”

The model is working well in Augusta. Calvin reports a renewed spirit of enthusiasm in the church, the first membership growth in many years, and a 24% increase in Every Member Canvass giving.

THE CCV MODEL

Thandeka, Associate Professor of Theology and Culture at Meadville/Lombard Theological School, Chicago, founded the Center for Community Values or CCV and I am a member of its Board. This organization is intent on seeing that, within the next three years, every Unitarian Universalist congregation on this continent will have considered moving to small-group ministry through Covenant Groups.

The CCV model follows Covenant Group fundamentals and adds an emphasis on community activism beyond the limits of the church. From the beginning, I have hoped that the trust generated within well-led Covenant Groups might allow people to struggle together with the difficult issues of social and cultural change to which we all need to be attending, and that this atmosphere of debate-free trust might help us face such concerns much more successfully than has been our experience so far.

Thandeka, writing in last month's *CGNews* (June 14, 2000) spoke of the overflow of goodwill that can come from a Covenant Group’s collective experience of compassion and well-being. This increase in-group energy, she wrote, “...gives some participants the collective ability to participate in community outreach projects that transport the Covenant Group beyond itself.” At the CCV GA gathering, she suggested these projects -- ranging from soup-kitchen work in a homeless shelter to organizing a campaign against sweatshops or any other choice made by the Covenant Group -- might be expected to happen once a month.

The successes of our Brewster, MA, church (local folk refer to them as “the conscience of Cape Cod”) bears out the usefulness of small-group ministry in social justice work. The Rev. James Robinson says the support of a Covenant Group is needed for any community-oriented project that is going to take more than four or five months.

MANY FLAVORS, STILL ONE DISH

Covenant Group work is shared ministry. It is a way of our finally living up to our professions of faith in the basic goodness in all humankind. It is a way of structuring our interactions so that all who come, the quiet ones as well as the bold, may be heard and known for who they are by six or more friends in the church.

Given the structure which allows this trust-based freedom to flourish, any viable variety of Covenant Group experience will enhance Unitarian Universalism and our churches and fellowships. These three identifiable models will probably be joined by others as we continue this grand exploration of lay ministry in small groups.

Sociologist Paul H. Ray says there are more than 40 million men and women in the United States with characteristics quite similar to those of Unitarian Universalists (except that they are, on average, younger and financially better off). If he is right and more than 20% of the people living within driving distance of your congregations are prospective members, why have we been growing at less than one percent per year, continentally?

Who cares? We know, finally, how to serve the basic needs of our members, our guests, and the vast numbers who need us but haven't found us yet. We are on our way to becoming a radically different Association of Unitarian Universalist congregations. Choose your flavor; join the feast.