

Why Do Churches Stay Under 150 Members, And 83% Under 250?

Rev. Glenn Turner, *Covenant Group News*, October 4, 1999

From what I have observed (20 years as a UU parish minister, and 18 years as a UUA District Field Staff person), churches grow when most of the visitors and new folk are integrated into one of the groups in the congregation. If there are no or few groups, other than committees, the choir, and a few programs, it's hard to make friends. Roy Oswald, from the Alban Institute, says that you have to make 6 friends in the first 6 months or you won't stay in a church. Seven out of nine people who come in the front door to worship end up leaving. The reverse is true with people who come into the church through small groups. There they meet and bond with others... are known and welcomed. are called by name.

ARE PROGRAMS THE ANSWER?

In *Twelve Keys to an Effective Church*, Kennon Callahan listed "programs" as being a functional rather than a relational characteristic of a church. I've since had to do some hard thinking about that. The work of Carl George, who has done a great deal of writing on small-group ministries, emphasizes that:

*relational groups focus on our lives.

*relational groups that exceed 10 people cease to be relational in their impact

The nature of many of our "programs" is oriented around learning about something... When we talk about "full-service" congregations, we expect that they are going to have a lot of programs. We expect churches to grow into full-service congregations. Supposedly, that happens at the 150 barrier. And, barrier it is.

Why don't more of our congregations pass the line? I suspect that most of our people in small congregations cherish the ideal of the "family" church whether they get it or not. Passing 150 is losing it. If the church offers mostly programs (teaching classes) rather

than relational groups, what was valued in the small church is lost. So, how might we develop a church differently, right from the outset, or how might we restructure, in order to provide the relational quality of spiritual development which our people, like everyone else, are looking for?

GIVE PEOPLE WHAT THEY WANT

We say we want inspiration, a religious community, and spiritual growth. Roy Oswald talks about the cathedral, the cell, and the closet. We want life-affirming worship. We want to be part of an intimate circle of friends. We may want to nurture our own spiritual life. In your congregation, how many groups, of from 8-12 members resemble spiritual relationship groups? How many groups are there in which the individual members share their experiences, reflect upon them, and explore their individual journeys together? This is the next area that Unitarian Universalism has to take seriously. And then, there is the nurturing of one's spiritual life, the "closet." One has to go outside the church, generally, to learn meditation, prayer, Tai Chi, Yoga, or journaling.

TAKE AN X-RAY OF YOUR CONGREGATION

I return to the question of whether your church has enough significant relational groups to meet the needs of your members. I assume that we can or should make it a normative expectation that everyone would want to be in a group. It should simply be what the church does besides worship. And so, if your congregation has 200 members, there should be around 20 groups or more (you should be inviting neighbors) that people are taking part in. If you have only 3 or 4 groups, you know why you aren't growing.

The supposition here is that if someone is part of a small intimate group in the church, they will be far less likely to resist the growth of the congregation as new groups emerge. My suggested MISSION statement is to minister to the hopes and hurts of the people in our community, and to radically define our community beyond our membership borders, and to seek to bring the people who need our support (and who will, in turn, give support to us) into our churches and into our lives.

PROGRAM TO RELATIONSHIP

What "program" does is somewhat self-serving. It appeals to our identity as well-educated, curious, seekers after the truth. It is insidiously elitist. "Ministry" is not. Ministry taps the caring aspect of our nature. It puts our intellect in the service of humanity. The potential of small relational groups is to address our own hurts and hopes and those of the people around us.

We are all part of the human race. We all have hurts and hopes. Catholics, Muslims, Pentecostals, and Methodists share this same concern. But, we each have our own theological twist to bring to bear with people. Ours is a radical respect for an individual's freedom of conscience. We do not expect conformity as the price of community. We have a greater tolerance for spiritual, ethical, and moral ambiguity than most people. Our lack of certainty about even our own answers to life's questions does not diminish our concern for others.

I grew up a Universalist. When I came to the conclusion that there was literally no heaven for all the people we hoped would end up there, I realized it was up to us to help the people in this life whose lives would be hell without our intervention. This is not a theoretical debating point. It is ministry. The question is: how is a church best organized to deliver ministry? ...

THE STRUCTURE OF THE SMALL GROUP MINISTRY

We begin with small groups, or "covenant" groups. The optimal number in a group is 10. That includes the host/hostess at whose home the group is held. It includes a leader and an apprentice. It includes several other people and an empty chair. The empty chair symbolizes the group's invitation to the next person to join.

Why ten? It's simply the maximum number which experience has shown can sustain the intimacy needed to meet people's needs. Go beyond that and there is less participation and more burnout on the part of the leaders. Others prefer 6-8. I think the group and its leader should decide what number is best for them. If you go beyond 10 you have a class rather than a relational group.

The group meeting is for a two-hour period, with the time strictly observed. There are opening words, perhaps a meditation, and a sharing. Then the group reflects upon a very brief reading about some aspect of life for about another 45 minutes. There is a time to do a "likes and wishes" ... and then some closing words. The formula is not set in stone. The groups meet from one to four times a month. The more they meet, the richer the experience will become. ...

The group leader is ideally a "facilitator," not a "teacher." He/she should have relationship skills: the ability to listen, to include everyone in the conversation, to handle awkward situations. The apprentice is working with the leader, and learning to be a group leader and may be asked to do more in leading the group as time goes by. They will also meet with the leader to process and discuss the group dynamics.

The host/hostess provides a space and arranges refreshments for each meeting.

The empty chair will be filled by a person recommended by the church staff, the

leaders, or members of the group who want someone to join them. The key to growth, to ministry, is reaching out to include more people. The potential here is enormous.

Do the people in the group have to be UU? No. Should they be invited to worship? Yes. Should they be pressured, is membership a condition for being part of a group? No. What we are doing here is ministry. Yes, we want the church to grow. Membership, ownership of an institution and what it does, is what supports our ministry. But, we serve. That's the nature of the institution.

Can people who are not UUs lead the groups? No. This is a UU church which is doing this ministry. Leadership roles and responsibilities are best nourished within the identity structure of the UU faith. The growth of a group may occasion the birth of a new group once, maybe even twice a year. When that happens, the leader will generally take a few of the newer people and form another group, inviting more to join. The apprentice will become the old group's leader and ask someone to work with them as the next apprentice.

Once a month, the group leaders will meet with a coach. But, the rule of 10 applies here, as well. A coach will meet with no more than 10 leaders. If you have 15 group leaders, then there will be a coach for 8 and one for 7.

What's the reason for a coach? A coach (who as the program develops over the years) will be someone who rises from the ranks, does the apprentice role, the leader role, and develops some experience about groups. They will meet on a regularly monthly basis to talk with the group leaders about what's happening in the groups, what's working well, what's difficult. They will explore the various group dynamics and what might be done to enhance or alter them. They will occasionally attend a group meeting of each of the leaders. They will

engage the leaders in reflecting on their work. In this setting, the leaders will be learning from experience. But, what we learn from is not experience but reflecting on experience.

The monthly group meetings are critical in the education of the leaders and even their coaches. In small churches with a minister, the minister may assume the initial role as coach. The minister may be the person who sets the topics, or gathers resources for the groups and their leaders.

As a church grows, it grows in 10s. There will always be someone to meet with 10 people. The leader will have his/her group of 10. The coach will have his/her group of 10. There will be another level of care, someone to meet with no more than 10 coaches. So, when the church is 5,000 to 10,000 strong, no one is dealing with more than 10 people all the way up and down the line. ...

DOES THIS APPROACH FIT WITH OUR PRINCIPLES AND PURPOSES?

As I see it, the very nature of this group process affirms the worth and dignity of each of its members. It's about justice, equity, and compassion in its approach outward to invite in the people who are not now guests at anyone's table. It's all about acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth. It is the setting for a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. The right of conscience is always underscored. It is democratic to the core.

I will not suggest that it will usher in a world community with peace, liberty and justice for all. But, depending on what materials are discussed, it might, as it might also foster respect for the interdependent web of life. Moreover, the living tradition we draw from can be incorporated in our focus themes -- a rich treasure trove from which to draw. The small-group ministry can lead to a fuller flowering of our Principles and Purposes.