

## **On Holidays and Every Day, It's Relationships That Matter**

by Michael D. Dalzell

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As you make your way to grandmother's house for the holidays, here's a sobering statistic to ponder: One in four of us has nobody we're really close to. Nobody.

About four years ago, sociologists at Duke University found that **the average American can name two people they would consider a "confidant."** Worse, a quarter of the people who were surveyed had no close personal relationship to anyone with whom they could share their most intimate thoughts, fears, and desires.

"This study reveals a level of human isolation that is unprecedented in American life — and perhaps unprecedented in human history," Peter Morales, now president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, said after the researchers published their work in the *American Sociological Review*. "Americans are lonelier than they have ever been."

It's not easy to build close relationships in adulthood. Outside of marriage, domestic partnerships, and professions like the military and public safety — where bonds form around the fragility of life — it's hard to find someone who's truly got your back. Even in a house of worship, where we come together to forge our spiritual selves, it can take years for some people to feel like they fit in, and many people don't really feel that way until they become close to one or more people in the congregation.

That's where small group ministry comes in. In the past 10 years, there has been a fundamental shift in Unitarian Universalist congregations toward offering a spiritual experience through small groups (or *covenant* groups), says Peter Bowden, a Massachusetts-based freelance producer, consultant, and co-founder of the UU Small Group Ministry Network.

"Fundamentally, we are relational creatures," says Bowden. "Relationships and telling stories are so central to our being, it is hard to have a healthy, vital, dynamic, and meaningful faith community if you don't have an intentional way for people to come together to form strong and ongoing relationships."

Today, most Unitarian Universalist congregations offer one, two, or several small groups of 10 or fewer people. Some groups are built around a particular theme — with names like "Truth Seekers" or "women's spirituality circle" — but most come together organically, with group mates based on the luck of the draw.

That makes each group's collective environment very different. "One of strengths and challenges of small group ministry is that every group is going to be different based on the people involved," says Bowden. "Whose lives are we using as springboards for our discussion? We look at different traditions and have readings from the world's wisdom, but then we start relating our life stories, trying to make sense of it. Who's in the room does make a difference."

At its core, small group ministry is a vehicle for meeting the needs of one another. "We provide a way to nurture the self in a way that is not just showing up for a worship service or for business," says Joe Schenk, small group ministry coordinator at the Unitarian Universalist Church at Washington Crossing

(UUCWC), in Titusville, New Jersey.

Nurturing the self ultimately leads to nurturing one another. "Small group ministry offers a unique opportunity to develop deep friendships that provide meaning in the lives of individuals," says Rev. Charles J. Stephens, UUCWC's minister. "This ranges from having someone to talk with after a Sunday service to someone who will visit someone during a critical time in a person's life."

"The megachurches have been doing this for some time," says Schenk. "They realized a while ago that to have some level of connectedness with 600 people, they needed to do something" on a more intimate level with their members.

The same is true for Unitarian Universalist churches, says Schenk, who then recites the inside joke about joining a UU congregation: "People come looking to connect and for spirituality, and we welcome them and offer them committee work."

*Connectedness*, Bowden agrees, is one of the three big "what's in it for mes" you'll get out of spiritual exploration through small group ministry (*meaning* and *getting in touch with your values* are the other two). "Amazing things come from just getting to know human beings that well in a way that's different from what you might get from a church coffee hour. Just knowing each other will lead to taking care of each other."

*Michael Dalzell is part of a small group ministry at UUCWC that meets twice each month. Through the variety of topics his group has explored, Mike has discovered new ways to view spirituality and to see the divine in others.*

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