

Minister's Page

Re-Vitalizing Small Group Ministry

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Small group ministry is a passion of mine from my first experience with self-help groups when I was a social worker almost 30 years ago. I witnessed these structured groups providing real support and healing time after time.

When small group ministry programs came along, I instinctively knew that this was a great way to help our members make powerful connections with one another, to deepen spiritually, and to develop the ability to not only articulate our UU faith, but to live it day to day.

For any congregation, these groups must be carefully tended in order to realize their full potential. When I arrived here in Schenectady, a small group ministry program was five years old. Facilitation was rotated among the group members. Groups had the same membership year after year. Sessions were the responsibility of each group. One group said that it did little more than check-in for their allotted time. They didn't engage in service. In short, these groups were not accountable and operated independently. The number of groups dwindled over time. It was clear that this program needed revitalization. I convened a planning team committed to renewing the promise of small group ministry.

Here's what we did:

- We recruited dedicated facilitators for the groups, trained them, and brought them together monthly to meet and exchange information.
- We made the covenant central to the group structure and renamed our small group ministry Covenant Circles.
- Each group followed the same session: I write the sessions and often incorporate recent sermon topics. This cross-fertilization has many benefits.
- Each group was required to do a service project for the congregation and in the community. After initial resistance, people now love doing this.

As with any change, we experienced some tensions that first year. But most of the participants re-signed for the following year and new people joined a Covenant Circle for the second year of our revitalized program.

Here's What We've Learned: We are now in year three of our rebirth. Our small group ministry program ultimately serves the mission of the church, which is a higher value than the desires of each group.

Our congregation has experienced many newcomers who have wanted to join our Covenant Circles now, not when we have a new sign-up period. We had placed a high value on the bonding experience in each group and opened to new members a couple of times a year. We realized that connecting newcomers to small group ministry was an act of hospitality, which became a higher value than group bonding.

Our ongoing learning is about flexibility and resilience: people are busy and find it difficult to commit to extended time frames. We are now experimenting with groups of 3, 6, or 9 month levels of commitment. We have not done this long enough to evaluate the results.

Small group ministry remains relevant and needed in our congregations -- perhaps more now than ever. Revitalization is, then, like cultivating a garden that needs tender loving care to keep producing its bounty.

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