

Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network Website
SMALL GROUP MINISTRY—FOR TIMES SUCH AS THESE!

Unitarian Universalist Community Church, Augusta, Maine, Rev. Helen Zidowecki, March 2017

This may take more than the usual 2 hour Small Group Ministry session. It could be used in a longer session, or over several meeting times. Many of the quotes are from sessions on the UU SGM Network Website, as noted in [], with a full reference at the end.

Opening Words:

I have been struggling with how to react when people show or express despair over the current political mood and turmoil. How do I relate to it myself? What is the basis for my stance, my actions or inactions? The following is an attempt to provide a base from which to act and respond, regardless of the issue at hand. And what better place or way to develop a response than through Small Group Ministry? And what better base than the UU Principles? Helen Zidowecki

Check-in/Sharing: How is it with your spirit today?

Topic: Small Group Ministry in this time

We learned how to be in relationship with each other in our small groups, and practiced
how to listen without needing to advise or respond.
how to share from our hearts.

Our new skills carried into our congregational life
as group participants each time we met.
as we listened to each other in times of challenge and times of celebration.
as we engaged with all parts of the congregation and structure.

Now we are turning to small group ministry as a place where we can grapple with the world around us,
the uncertainty of seeing our values challenged.
the animosity, fear, and rage that is part of public and private rhetoric.
the absolute certainty in the rightness of opposing positions.

Now we are taking small group ministry out into the world, and we are
inviting small group ministry into how we live in the present time and place.
constantly using what we have learned in our groups and congregation as we engage with
people who differ from us within and beyond our own community.

What can you take from your SGM experience into your life as you encounter the things that are contrary to your sense of well-being and security?

Topic: UU Principles

UU Principles provide solid basis for understanding and acting. Regardless of how many times we have read these, or used session plans related to them, or tried to follow them, there is new wisdom and understanding awaiting us related to the particular situation that we are facing. Three of the Principles are especially relevant to responding and living with and in the chaos of our society, generally and related to specific issues. The Principles are readily available to us, waiting to be employed as we live out our faith.

Principle: Inherent worth and dignity of every person

Glenn Turner ["Finding a Footing"] uses "All God's Children Have a Place in the Choir" by Bill Staines. (<http://www.peterpaulandmary.com/music/24-10.htm>)

Suggestion: Sing, or read the verses, with the chorus in unison.

Particularly notice this verse and chorus:

Everybody here is a part of the plan
We all get to play in the great critter band
From the eagle in the sky to the whale in the sea
It's one great symphony.

Chorus: All God's critters got a place in the choir
Some sing low, some sing higher
Some sing out loud on the telephone wire
And some just clap their hands, or paws or anything they got now.

This declares that 1) everyone is needed, and that 2) we bring differing abilities and perspectives. This starts with the presumption of diversity of who is present and moves to the understanding that there is a place for each and every one.

Within the wide diversity, the inherent worth and dignity addresses our basic belief that human nature is essentially good. This differs from some religious traditions that focus on the concept that we are born in sin, or are essentially bad. The challenge is to *accept* people as they are, including characteristics and positions that differ from mine, without judgment or blame. Blame and judgement get in the way of trying to reach common ground. And common ground is where understanding and moving toward wholeness begins. To rest on the premise that people are originally bad or sinful, allows us to pity or judge, and sets us in a position of superiority. The premise that people are essentially good sets a common base from which to begin positive dialog.

The inherent worth and dignity applies to ourselves as much – maybe more – than to others. Understanding and believing in our own worth and dignity recognizes that our views, values, and perspectives matter. If we do not feel respected, or cannot respect ourselves in a situation, what is preventing us from being open in a relationship. Understanding, accepting, and respecting ourselves allows the space and opportunity to be open to others. We do not have to ‘prove’ ourselves, rather just ‘be’ ourselves.

How does your view of human nature affect your ability to interact with others whose views may greatly differ from yours?

What is your view of yourself and your own level of self-respect?

Principle: The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.

Democratic process relates to having a say, and a right and obligation to participate in decision-making. It does not guarantee that decisions will go the way that we would like. However, involvement is the key component: if we have not been involved, do we really have a right to complain if the outcome is contrary to our wish?

We all have some pieces of the truth, or the “best way”—you, they, me – and no one has ALL of the perspectives or answers or truth. This creates the impetus to learn about each other’s perspective to get to the commonalities, the truth or value that is shared – the “what”. The problems arise in addressing the “how”. For example, the energy that is consumed in the conflict of prochoice or prolife would better serve working toward a common goal of decreasing unwanted pregnancies that may lead to dire action of termination of a pregnancy in the first place. To focus on reaching the shared concern, we go back to the inherent worth and dignity of every person, assumption of good faith and a deep spiritual practice that also holds us accountable to the principles.

In "The Destiny of Our Democracy," the Rev. William G. Sinkford, President, Unitarian Universalist Association, puts it this way (November 3, 2004 - Boston, MA) [The Destiny..]

"The democratic process is an act of faith: not faith that any one point of view will prevail, but faith that the will of the people will point us toward the Beloved Community. And in this national election, "we the people" have spoken, millions more of us than ever before. Unitarian Universalists lived out our faith by registering tens of thousands of new voters. We can rightly be proud of our commitment to this democracy. We stood clearly and proudly on the side of love.

Not only is democracy an act of faith, it is an imperfect process. This national election, like the last, showed us how far we have to go to enfranchise all of our people. But I take great hope from the relationships our congregations developed in this work.

But Unitarian Universalism is *liberal religion, not liberal politics*. Today, while so many celebrate and so many grieve, I hope that Unitarian Universalists will hold fast to our calling. Political sound bites cannot contain it. Party designations do not describe it. Few votes were cast yesterday without reservations in the heart. Our congregations need to be religious homes where the reality of both joy and grief, certainty and uncertainty, can be present.

In 1964, the Rev. Jack Mendelsohn wrote a book titled *Being Liberal in an Illiberal Age*. Today, Jack reminded me that all ages are illiberal. And, thus, in every age, it is the role of liberal religion to offer a Gospel of openness, of healing and of hope. Our profession of faith is that the arc of the universe is long, but, with our commitment, it bends toward justice.

.....Unitarian Universalists will do our part. We cannot afford to fuel the stridency and divisiveness of this political campaign. Nor can we afford to withdraw. We are an essential part of this body politic. And we will continue our vigilance and our advocacy for the values we hold dear.

There is only one destiny for this nation and its people. May that destiny be one of growing justice and equity in our policies and growing compassion in our hearts."

So the challenge is this:

"For if we choose only to expose ourselves to opinions and viewpoints that are in line with our own, studies suggest that we become more polarized, more set in our ways. That will only reinforce and even deepen the political divides in this country. But if we choose to actively seek out information that challenges our assumptions and our beliefs, perhaps we can begin to understand where the people who disagree with us are coming from." Barack Obama, University of Michigan Spring Commencement, May 1, 2010. [Politics]

And let us remember that

"America is not just a democracy, it represents a certain culture of competitive mobility and personality aspirations, politics is not merely a clash of interests, but a clash of dreams."
David Brooks [A Space to Sit]

How does the democratic process become a spiritual practice?

How can I honor the process as I work toward of common understanding?

Principle: Respect for the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part.

Whatever we do or do not do, how we treat another who agrees or disagrees with us, what attitude or assumptions we bring to interactions, influence the outcome in the present and into the

future. When we presume that everyone in the room shares our perspectives, there may be a disconnect. In actuality, we learn more, understand our own perspectives more, and are able to communicate more and even better, when we assume that people *will* think and feel differently from us. This also means that they may not understand a position. Clarity is a necessity, along with the ability to recognize differences in interpretations and to explain in a way that someone *can* hear a perspective, rather than assuming that they *do not want* to hear.

“Finding Our Place” by Thomas Merton [“Politics” session plan]

Humans have a responsibility to their own time
not as if they could seem to stand outside it
and donate various spiritual and material benefits
to it from a position of compassionate distance.
Humans have a responsibility to find themselves
where they are, in their own proper time and place
in the history to which they belong and
to which they must inevitably contribute
either their response or their evasions,
either truth and act,
or mere slogan and gesture.

Coming back to Small Group Ministry.....

What can you take from this session as we live with and through the current political climate?

How can Small Group Ministry support you?

Closing

Grant us understanding, when the positions of others make our lives difficult.

Grant us compassion, when our need for compassion and understanding is so great.

Grant us the increased strength of conviction, when we could so readily lose heart.

Grant us courage as we work to include sacred values of justice and love into human institutions.

Bless our speaking and our actions. May they be with conviction but not rancor, so that the conversation continues and expands.

Bless our commitment to continuing on, realizing that love and justice in human institutions come slowly rather than quickly.

Bless our hope in the future, faith in our stand, and love that endures beyond the immediate and into infinity.

Blessed be for the strength and commitment of so many people working toward just and compassion in human relations. Rev. Helen Zidowecki, November 2009 [“After A Vote”]

Session plan references, noted after some quotes in [].

“A Space to Sit,” Lutherville, ME, Robin Sinn, Nov. 2016

“After a Vote,” Augusta, ME, Rev. Helen Zidowecki, Nov. 2009

“Finding a Footing in a Sharply Divided Nation and Political and Social Implications of Differing Conservative and Liberal Viewpoints on Human Nature” Auburn, ME, Rev. Glenn Turner

“Finding Balance, Living with Polarities – Freedom and Accountability,” Eugene, OR, March 2010

“Politics,” Stony Brook, NY (Allen, Rev. Margie; Anderson, Rev. Dr. Linda), 2/22/2015

“Political and Social Implications of Differing Conservative and Liberal Viewpoints on Human Nature,”

“The Destiny of Our Democracy -- A Post [2004] Election Session,” Peter Freedman Bowden, November 2004

ALL GOD'S CRITTERS

[\(Bill Staines\)](#)

All God's critters got a place in the choir
Some sing low, some sing higher
Some sing out loud on the telephone wire
And some just clap their hands, or paws or anything they got now

Listen to the bass, it's the one on the bottom
Where the bullfrog croaks and the hippopotamus
Moans and groans with a big to do
And old cow just goes 'moo'

Well the dogs and the cats they take up the middle
The honeybee hums and the crickets fiddle
The donkey brays and the pony neighs
The old coyote howls

All God's critters got a place in the choir
Some sing low, some sing higher
Some sing out loud on the telephone wire
And some just clap their hands, or paws or anything they got now

Listen to the top where the little bird sings
The melody with the high voice ringing
The hoot owl hollers over everything
And the jaybird disagrees

Singing in the nighttime, singing in the day
The little duck quacks and he's on his way
The 'possum don't have much to say
And the porcupine talks to herself

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Everybody here is a part of the plan

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