

AN INTRODUCTION TO SMALL GROUP MINISTRY

History

1. META-CHURCHES-Willow Church-over 10,000 members; lots of literature about it-Carl George in particular
2. UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCHES-First Parish in Brewster, Massachusetts, All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and the Unitarian Universalist Community Church in Augusta Maine-massive growth.
3. MANY GA SESSIONS-Lots of trainings for ministers on the topic; many names for it-covenant groups and small group ministry are the most common.
4. SPREADING LIKE WILDFIRE-many, many UU churches are doing it.

Goals for the Program

1. OVERCOME RESISTANCE TO GROWTH-fear of loss of intimacy, the minister's clinging to being the only pastoral counselor and needing to know everyone and everything that's going on.
2. GROWTH-both in spiritual development and intimacy and also in the size of the church.
3. MINISTRY REDEFINED-as we move from a small church to a mid-sized one, we need to work on defining ministry as what we all do and not just what the minister does. Actually, this is the true definition of ministry any way, but as there are more people than the minister can handle or even know, it becomes a crucial definition if a church wants to exceed 150. Small group ministry increases the amount of caring taking place in a church. It changes the church's culture.
4. INTEGRATING MEMBERS-a way to get know several other people in depth; church literature says that to make members of newcomers, they need to get to know six people pretty well.
5. SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT-of the individual and the congregation. Topics and questions are all geared to this purpose and are shared by all the groups so we are all talking about the same things.
6. INTIMACY-a small group gives each individual a chance to get to know six to eleven people very well in a relatively short time, and if the person changes groups, six to eleven more and so on.
7. NOT THERAPY-there's a fine line between getting to know people pretty well and providing therapy, but you will recognize it when you see it-if not at first, before very long. Better to be looking for it and to stop it before it gets going. A difficult person, someone who dominates, seems stuck on one issue, asks for advice but then plays the "yes, but" game, or presents her or himself as a victim

may be in need of therapy. Group rules/ a covenant should set up the group so that you have a mechanism by which to address such a person. You should talk to me about such a person so that I can talk to them. Talking about what the goals of the program are before we start the groups and the at the first meeting will also help prevent most people's seeking this kind of help in a situation not designed for this purpose.

8. FULL CONGREGATIONAL INVOLVEMENT-as full as possible. The goal is that everyone who attends, member or not, would belong to a group. Of course, not everyone will want to. In a church this size, we might have 15 to 20 groups. Currently, we have seven.
9. ADAPTED TO OUR CONGREGATION-the point is to adopt those features of what others have done and found successful when they seem suitable to our particular needs and to make changes when they don't suit us. There's a lot of wiggle room in the suggested guidelines.

Process

1. BUILD SUPPORT FOR THE PROGRAM-publicity in the newsletter, a flyer, minister, board, implementation team, facilitators, congregation.
2. MINISTER TRAINING-I've attended many GA sessions on the topic, talked with various ministers about how they've done it, and spent much of the summer reading whatever I could find about it.
3. IMPLEMENTATION TEAM-they are Sara Dyrud, Karen and Tim Hirsch, Bob Jankowski, Rick Kark, Tess Larson, Judy Lippold, Greg Maurer, Kevin and Michelle McNulty, Kathleen Powers, and Alex Smith. They are the first facilitators. I selected them, and they have been meeting since last September. They meet monthly to experience small group ministry, to learn about the program, and to be trained as facilitators.
4. BOARD TRAINING-Last fall I also trained the Board.
5. SERVICE FOR THE CONGREGATION-last January 19, 2003, the facilitators and I presented a service on small group ministry.
6. SIGN UP FOR GROUPS-soon after there was a sign up for groups.
7. ASSIGNMENT TO GROUPS-in consultation with the facilitators, I placed each individual who signed up in a group.
8. GROUPS BEGIN-last March the groups began to meet.
9. REASSIGNMENT DAY-in the late spring of 2004, there will be a day for people to change groups, begin a new one, and to evaluate their experience.

Necessary Elements

1. SIZE-about 10 people. At least five and no more than 12.
2. FREQUENCY-once a month at least, more if group desires, in someone's home or at church.
3. FORMAT-must combine worshipful and/or centering readings and personal check-in periods at the start and end. (See the recommended format below.)

4. **FACILITATORS**-Persons chosen and trained by the minister, who then facilitate a group for the facilitators. One person facilitates and another is the assistant facilitator and may take the facilitator's place when he or she must be absent. If the group grows too large, then one of the facilitators becomes the facilitator for the part of the old group who join with others to become a new group.
5. **EMPTY CHAIR**-Always at least one, to symbolize those not yet reached who need us and the expectation of changing groups, perhaps of one begun with some of the members of your current group.
6. **COVENANTS**-During the second or third meeting, groups agree on how to be with each other. Later, agree on one service to perform for the church or community at least twice and preferably three or four times a year. For possible items to include in covenants, see the section on them below.

Format

1. **OPENING READING**-preferably from a Unitarian Universalist source (our hymn book contains plenty of material for years of these small groups). 5 minutes
2. **OPENING CHECK-IN**-form differs. One way is to ask each person briefly states her/his answer to a question such as: What's on your mind today? What seems most important to you these days? Another way is to allow each person to speak for 4 minutes without interruption about whatever they wish to bring to the group and to end with 10 to 15 minutes of follow-up by the group. A third way is ask each person to share about the current state of her/his physical or spiritual health, about joys and concerns about loved ones, and/or concerns/excitement about what is happening in his/her life. Each group develops its own customs as to the length of sharing and about how to respond-if at all. 30-55 minutes
3. **THE FOCUS/PURPOSE OF THE MEETING**-a paragraph or two lays out a topic and presents questions that will elicit thoughtful discussion and significant reflection. A group may stay with the topic several weeks or be done in one meeting. All groups will address the same topics in the same order. 60-75 minutes
4. **CHECK-OUT**-a positive format for feedback using a brief go around the room; likes and wishes, e.g., "I like how we approached the topic this evening, but I wish we had move through the sharing a little more quickly." 5 minutes
5. **CLOSING WORDS**-these bring the formal session to an end. Those who wish to can leave while others may stay to chat. 5 minutes

Covenants

1. The primary covenant will be about how the members agree to be in relationship with each other over time. Together the group establishes a community in which justice, democracy, and human dignity are embodied. The group agrees to abide by a set of ground rules for right relationship.
2. A second covenant is a commitment to welcome new members to the group. The empty chair at each meeting is to symbolize this commitment. Openness to change prevents exclusiveness and factionalism.

3. A third covenant is an agreement to engage in service to the congregation and the larger world on a regular basis. This promise maintains a connection to the larger organization and works against excessive inwardness within the group.
4. A primary covenant might also include:
 1. What people hear within the group, stays within the group as much as possible.
 2. A person can pass
 3. People do not interrupt each other
 4. Expenses are to be shared
 5. Starting and ending times are fixed or flexible
 6. Side conversations are okay or are too disruptive
 7. A commitment to understanding those with different opinions
 8. Members share the privilege and responsibility of helping the group function
 9. People will not participate in or encourage put-downs
 10. How time is shared, such as only one person speaking at a time
 11. Smoking and alcohol are or are not permissible

Possible Session Topics

1. YOUR RELIGIOUS TIMELINE--divide the line in sections by decades, plus the decades you expect to live. For each decade, indicate with a picture or words how you understood God or felt about religion.
2. WORSHIP-what kinds of worship can you think of, what's it for, share an experience of memorable or moving worship, what makes worship meaningful for you, how do you prepare yourself for worship?
3. LIVING THROUGH LOSS-ask members of the group to share an experience of loss that has been a significant part of their life journeys.
4. QUESTIONS OF FAITH-what are you spending and being spent for? What commands and receives your best time, your best energy? What causes, dreams, goals or institutions are you pouring out your life for? As you live, what power or powers do you fear or dread? On what power or powers do you rely or trust? To what or whom are you committed in this life? In death? With whom or what group do you share your most sacred and private hopes for your life and for the lives of those you love? What are those most sacred hopes, those most compelling goals and purposes in your life?
5. LIVING SIMPLY-What are the demands in my life that keep me too busy? What needs or forces keep me too busy? What do I push aside? What would I be willing to give up? Ending question after most of the sharing, what one thing are you willing to try before we meet again that will move your life closer to your own goals for a simpler, more meaningful life?
6. A LIFE SOUVENIR
7. FORGIVENESS
8. POETRY
9. SERVICE
10. OUR GIFTS

11. LIVING AND DYING
12. LIVING WITH FEAR
13. IT MATTERS WHAT WE BELIEVE
14. MOTHERS
15. FATHERS
16. DECEMBER HOLIDAYS
17. THE MYSTERY OF HEALING
18. HOW CAN I HELP
19. TO BE A UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST
20. TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP

30 OTHERS ALREADY IDENTIFIED AND MANY MORE YET TO COME

Minister's Role

1. ASSIGNMENT OF MEMBERS TO GROUPS-consulting with facilitators I will assign members to groups, trying to avoid clashes in personality and placement of more than one person who might need extra care in any one group.
2. DESIGN OF SMALL GROUPS-I will provide the list of topics and suggested readings.
3. FACILITATOR FOR THE FACILITATORS-they will meet with me to discuss how their groups are going and to do small group ministry for them. No one gets less out; everyone gets nourished.

Name

- Small group ministry because that's what we are doing. We are calling them circles: Seed Circle, Moibus Circle, Squared Circle, Reflection Circle, Morning Circle.

Facilitators' Role

1. Possess a strong commitment to Unitarian Universalism.
2. Understand the general concept of SGM.
3. Establish, with the minister, the guidelines and topics for the groups
4. Take responsibility for managing group process issues.
5. Help groups to establish their covenant (what they agree to as a group) and to maintain these ground rules in practice.
6. Keep the group on track.
7. Maintain shared leadership
8. Model facilitation skills
9. Clarify group expectations.
10. Encourage participation by all.

11. Deal with the logistics (times and places) of meetings; always begins and end the meetings on time.
12. Attend monthly meetings with Minister or Coach.
13. Model openness and caring.
14. Facilitate group decision-making.
15. Maintain appropriate confidentiality.
16. Share with the minister when someone in the group is having a particularly bad time, with permission, of course.

Guideline Issues

1. Size of groups
2. Policy on birthing new groups
3. How and when to add members to groups
4. How can groups bridge rather than bond-service in the church/community
5. Check in procedures—simply witnessing without comment, allowing cross-conversation during check in, sharing then responding??
6. Techniques for talking/time-keeping
7. How to deal with existing groups that may want to adapt toward a new model.
8. Question of whether baby-sitting/child-care space could be provided for groups meeting at church or in homes.
9. How focus/discussion topics will be generated and ordered.
10. Scheduling of group meetings
11. Process of adding and dropping facilitators.
12. Role/importance of apprentices-renewal/training of new leaders for expanding ministry & growth.

Background Material

Available from <http://members.mint.net/uuccaug/> under Small Group Ministry:
"Designing and implementing a 'small group ministry' focus for your congregation by the Rev. Glenn H. Turner. "Transforming our churches with small group ministry" by the Rev. Glenn H. Turner. "A Small Group Ministry Resource Book: The Unitarian Universalist Community Church of Augusta, Maine by the Rev. Calvin O. Dame

Available from www.the-ccv.org: "A Covenant Group Source Book" by the Center for Community Values

Additional material available is listed in these resources, but this handout is more than enough to understand the process and get us started. It is an overview of SGM based on these resources, but for further information, please go to these web sites and explore.
