

U.U. Small Group Ministry **Quarterly**



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Reflections On Maturing Small Group Ministry Programs Rev. Calvin O. Dame, NYC

Covenant Group/Small Group Ministry programs have developed in Unitarian Universalist congregations in a variety of forms. Some are modest, involving a few groups that foster connection and spiritual exploration for a limited number of participants, existing at the margin of congregational life, much like a respectable adult education offering. Other programs are more ambitious; involve a substantial number of adult members; consciously coordinate the lay and professional ministry of the congregation; and are intentionally organized to further the mission and vision of the congregation. **Covenant groups almost invariably deepen connections and contribute to the life of the congregation. And the wider the vision with which they begin, the richer that impact may be.**

Small group ministry has rapidly spread throughout our movement over the last few years because it so well serves the needs for intimacy and spiritual growth that bring people through our doors. **But even good programs, well-conceived, enthusiastically begun and diligently supported, can begin to lose vitality over time.** The level of participation can decline, it can become more difficult to recruit facilitators, some of the best leaders move on to new challenges. **What gives?**

Well, I think some decline in the level of initial enthusiasm is inevitable; otherwise, obviously, it wouldn't be initial enthusiasm. But I also believe that **the leaders of a congregation can thoughtfully guide a program from an exciting introductory phase to a healthy maturity.** Here is the advice I have to share.

Begin Well: There is now a wealth of material and resources available online and through the Small Group Ministry Network (www.smallgroupministry.net) on setting up an effective and healthy Small Group Ministry Program. I urge congregations to take the time to understand the dynamics and potential of Covenant Groups before beginning and then to launch them intelligently.

Don't Cut Corners: What experience has shown is that the programs that thrive are the programs that embrace the largest vision of small group ministry. Facilitators must meet for training and support, programs that maintain a service component tend to stay fresh and vigorous, groups that are open to new members or regularly reform are regularly refreshed!

Commit Resources: In many congregations the Small Group Ministry or Covenant Groups may be the

(Continued on Page 2)

Supporting the Vision Caster Diana Dorroh, Baton Rouge, LA

In Peter Bowden's thoughtful article, "Holding the Vision of Small Group Ministry" in the Fall, 2006 Small Group Ministry Quarterly, he explains that **ministers are often very involved in the SGM program's startup, but can't sustain that level of involvement as the program continues.** I was particularly challenged by Peter's last sentence: **"It takes a strong lay leader or other staff person to uphold the vision for this ministry when the primary vision caster(s) has stopped broadcasting the message."**

An alternative to the approach Peter suggests, is for a lay leader or staff person to steer the professional minister toward what needs to be done to uphold the vision, with specifics about what needs to be said and when and how. This is how the SGM program works at the Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge. It is a large mid-sized church (350 members) with a large Small Group Ministry program (200 participants) but only one minister, Rev. Steve Crump. I am a fulltime volunteer staff person and spend about eight hours a week coordinating the SGM program. Six years ago, Steve and I worked with the initial set of leaders to launch the program. Since then, he and I have worked together to lead the program. We have been blessed with about 28 committed leaders who share the vision and implement our model. The leaders meet together about eight times a year, breaking into small groups for problem solving. **As the only minister, Steve's attention and focus is widely spread among many competing priorities, so the steering role is the one I need to play here.** He often has a better idea than me, but it's up to me to take the initiative to suggest actions. These include congregational recognition of the leaders, leaders meetings, and problem-solving session with leaders who have difficult challenges.

It's practically an obsession of mine that **the leaders need to hear our minister's vision of SGM and that they need to hear it often, because it's ministry and it's important.** The leaders need support and inspiration from the congregation's spiritual leader. This means scheduling the leaders meetings when he can attend and rescheduling when necessary. Steve always does a wonderful job, but he doesn't have to plan the leaders meetings or attend meetings to plan the leaders meetings, He just has to read the agenda in my emails or discuss the agenda briefly with me before the leaders meeting and then to be there.

Obviously, this partnership requires trust between the minister and coordinator and a shared vision of a thriving small group ministry program. **But if this trust can be established, it allows the professional minister of the congregation to play the vision casting role.**

U.U. Small Group Ministry Network

155 Evarts Street
Newport, RI 02840
March, 2007

Dear Small Group Ministry Friends,

We are writing to you on behalf of the Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network because we all share a common passion: making our congregations healthier and happier through Small Group Ministries or Covenant Groups.

The mission of the Network is “to help create healthy congregations and a vital Unitarian Universalist movement by promoting and supporting Small Group Ministry.” We do that by developing new resources, training leaders, and providing opportunities for small group participants to get together and share experiences. Our website has a wealth of free, practical resources such as session plans, event listings, the monthly Covenant Group e-Newsletter, and the SGM Quarterly journal. Please visit us at www.smallgroupministry.net.

An independent affiliate of the Unitarian Universalist Association (recently identified by InterConnections as one of the top ten resources for congregations) our Network was initially funded by the Fund for Unitarian Universalism, but we receive no other Association funding. Most of those doing the work of the Network are volunteers. Support for this important ministry has to come from gifts, and individual and congregational memberships.

Now we need to ask for your help. We know that many of you take a special collection monthly in support of various causes. Many of you also hold an annual Small Group Ministry Sunday in which you recognize and honor the facilitators and participants who make up your small groups. (If you don't do that now, we hope you will consider scheduling such a Sunday program.) Our request is that you pass an open plate for contributions to the small group ministry program, yours and ours, during your Small Group Ministry Sundays. We ask that you forward part of that collection to the UU Small Group Ministry Network so that we may continue to help congregations start Small Group Ministry programs and to support these programs where they are already helping our congregations expand and deepen.

All of us associated with the Network appreciate deeply your continued leadership in the Small Group Ministry movement.

Sincerely yours,

Rev. Glenn Turner,
Rev. Robert L. Hill,

The Advisory Board of the U. U. Small Group Ministry Network

Small Group Ministry at Interweave Convo 2007

Rev. Jonalu Johnstone
President, Interweave Continental

How do you encourage and support deep connection among folks who come together for a weekend and may never see each other again? How do you draw newcomers into an established group that has met year after year? **In short, how can you make a weekend workshop or conference better?**

With small groups, of course.

For the last twenty-five years, Interweave Continental has held an annual Convo (short for "Convocation"), inviting UU's from all over the continent to come together to consider issues of concern for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people. **This year, as we reached out to bring in more young people, we added small groups to our schedule as a way to build connections and give attendees the chance to process their experiences.** In this experiment, we were following General Assembly and some other groups I've participated in, including Small Church Conferences and Ministers' Retreats in the Southwest District.

The process was designed to deepen people's experience, to increase their connection with others, and to allow them an opportunity to process what they learned. **Because we wanted to create a mix, especially across age groups, we randomized the groups,** using colored dots on nametags. This meant that people were not in groups with the friends or partners they arrived with. **Instead, they had to meet new people.** Another way to group people, of course, is to assign them in advance. That's the strategy we use at Ministers' Retreats, creating groups whose members have a mix of time in ministry, type of ministry, and cluster.

For Convo's small groups, board members served as our facilitators. Their job was to keep things moving, to watch to make sure everyone got an opportunity to talk and to listen, and to generally monitor the functioning of the group. I provided them with session plans, including opening and closing words, check-in suggestions and discussion questions. Ideally, facilitators should meet for an hour beforehand to discuss the plans and how to relate in the groups, and once during the weekend, perhaps over a meal, to process how the groups are going.

Groups had three meetings – an hour on Friday evening, a half hour on Saturday morning after a keynote speaker and workshop, and an hour late Saturday afternoon before dinner. In the first session, people introduced themselves and got to say something positive about what was happening on queer issues in their congregations, as well as talked about their hopes and concerns for the conference. The second session allowed reflection on a highlight of the morning, and questions about making Interweave more inclusive particularly of various age groups – a major theme for the weekend. The final session provided a time to reflect on the overall experience and how people would bring their learnings back to their congregations.

Participants wanted more! Next year, we may plan for an additional group Sunday morning, and perhaps more time on Saturday morning. **Many folks reported that small groups were the highlight of their weekend, even though they loved the other parts, to!** On top of that, people went home with new friends they hope to see again next year.

Why Do I Come to Sunday Services? Jay Wolin, Orlando, FL

When I come to services, I listen intently to the service, and try to obtain meaning and understanding that can add to my life. What makes the worship experience different from say my listening to lectures or sermons on my IPOD, or reading a book? There is something unique about the worship experience: **we are connected to the people around us with whom we worship.** Gaining that connection is the hardest part for new members and visitors to our congregations, I imagine. **So the question is, how can we create those connections, and more importantly how can we deepen those connections so that they become meaningful to our lives?**

For me, Covenant Groups have created that deeply meaningful experience by giving me the opportunity to explore with a group of people, the deep questions of life in an environment that is trusting and nonjudgmental. I know that once a month those two hours are set aside to explore and share ideas with others on a designated topic. Covenant groups are also a way to share with others where we are in the course of our journey through life. **All of these discussions deepen the meaningful connection we create with each other.**

After a worship service which I led, a couple of members of my Covenant Group came up and gave me a hug. They said they felt they had a vested interest in my service, and my future (I am currently attending divinity school part time). **And that was so true, for they have listened to my story for over a year now, of the ups and downs, the excitement and doubts, of my journey.** They have shared it with me and supported me, as I have shared their journeys with them, and that is what creates bonds. **Yes, that is what gives me the special connection I feel when I worship here on Sundays.**

What is truly unique though is that these bonds are created with people I might not otherwise know without the Covenant Group. I liken it somewhat to having moved to Greenwich Village in Manhattan after growing up in the Bronx in New York City. Walking side by side down the street were business people, punk rockers, young, old, gay, straight, starving artists, and people with trust funds. This diversity of people, accepting of each other, taught me that it is okay to be and think differently and that diverse people can live together peacefully.

What Covenant Groups provide is a means to allow all people, not just to walk side by side together but to meet, connect and develop friendships with each other. **It is a way to build the foundation of, and expand our beloved community so that we can create and spread peace and harmony throughout the world.** I encourage everyone to participate in and support covenant groups so we can continue to build the ever growing web of our connections.

Starting a Revolution: Roots of the Small Group Ministry Movement

An Audio CD Interview with Rev. Glenn Turner

Peter Bowden, UU PLANET Ministry & Media

During a recent small group ministry seminar, it came up that a number of the congregations in my area haven't met the Rev. Glenn Turner who retired from ministry a few years ago. Realizing this, I decided it would be **good to start preserving our small group ministry movement's oral history and insight from its leaders. To start, I chose to interview Glenn Turner. You may know that he is the one who got Calvin Dame and Bob Hill started.** We may have found small group ministry without him, but there is no doubt that Rev. Turner's efforts served as an important catalyst. Next on the list to interview: Bob Hill!

This interview is available on CD and will be of greatest interest to UU church geeks and small group junkies like me. Those of you interested in getting to know more of our SGM movements history, Glenn's experiences with small groups and working with facilitators, and his thoughts on where all of this is going -- you'll enjoy this 70 minute interview. We even discuss anti-racism and diversity. The interview is divided into fifteen tracks. You may listen to samples of each track and order the audio CD at smallgroupministry.net.

Need Help with Your Youth Group? Youth SGM Resource Available Commissioned by the UUSGM Network Written by the Rev. Helen Zidowecki.

The Small Group Ministry format has been used effectively with Youth to create powerful group experiences. **Drawing on her years of experience working directly with Youth, Helen Zidowecki has created "Small Group Ministry with Youth", a useful booklet for those wanting concrete help.** This resource includes a session for facilitators, and discussion and session plans for The Five Steps to Building Community and Six Components of a Balanced Youth Program. A total of 25 session plans are included. The resource costs \$25 plus \$5 shipping and handling. All proceeds from this resource, in excess of development cost, go to support the ministry of the UUSGM Network. **You can order the resource on-line at smallgroupministry.net or contact Peter Bowden at (401-855-0037).**

"Sustaining a Strong SGM Program" Thursday, April 12, 7-9 PM First Unitarian Congregation of Cleveland, Ohio

This First Unitarian Congregation of Cleveland is pleased to offer a training opportunity for SGM enthusiasts. **The workshop will cover the following topics: the power and purpose of Small Group Ministry (or Covenant Groups); the essential components of a Small Group Ministry program; addressing common challenges in an SGM program; and developing shared leadership within a small group..** The church is located at 21600 Shaker Boulevard, Shaker Heights, Ohio. Please contact mellen@smallgroupministry.net if you'd like to attend.

The workshop leader is the Dr. M'ellen Kennedy, a UU community minister and community psychologist. Dr. Kennedy has been working with lay led small groups for over 20 years and has offered facilitator training to hundreds of lay and professionals leaders.

Boost Your Small Group Ministry Program with a Local or Regional Conference!

Is your SGM Program languishing or not as vital as you'd hoped? Do you have a second or third generation of Covenant Group leaders who need a solid grounding in the essentials of SGM? Are you wanting help in launching a new program?

Maybe it's time for a Small Group Ministry Conference! The UU Small Group Ministry Network designs and provides regional and local conference. **We work with local congregations and Districts to tailor workshops to the needs of SGM students and enthusiasts in the specific area.** Here are some comments from various conferences led by the Network:

"Thank you so much for all the great useful information. I enjoyed the variety of presenters and topics. I feel I have the tools I need to start SGM in my church. I also appreciated tips for how I might modify the approach to fit my home congregation."

"I will take back to my church tons of info and insights into how to be more effective. I have more confidence in my abilities and purpose."

"The experience filled my head with information and my heart with inspiration. I feel confident that I can now enhance the spiritual lives of members of my congregation. Having done some teaching myself, I am well aware of the time, effort, and dedication the presenters gave to the workshops and participants." "

To explore the possibility of a local or regional conference in your area, please contact us at conferences@smallgroupministry.net.

"Ideas move rapidly when their time comes." Carolyn Heilbrun

Small Group Ministry at General Assembly & Ferry Beach 2007

Portland, OR, June 20-24, 2007
To register and for more info, visit uua.org



Representatives and members of our Unitarian Universalist congregations and organizations will be gathering for our General Assembly (GA). Programs about Small Group Ministry or Covenant Groups are among the many exciting offerings at GA in Portland, OR, this year.

Are You planning an SGM event at GA?
Let us know and we'll help You get the word out in the Summer/GA Issue of this Quarterly.

The UU Small Group Ministry Network Is Offering the Following Workshops:

Facilitator Training for Small Group Ministry

Small Group Ministry or Covenant Groups are transforming how we do congregational life. One of the challenges that lay and professional leaders face is how to adequately train facilitators. In this workshop, members of the Small Group Ministry Network will share our collective wisdom on what makes for quality leadership development. Date and time to be announced.

Emerging Models of Small Group Ministry

Congregations across our denomination are developing successful and exciting variations on Small Group Ministry or Covenant Groups. This panel of members of the Small Group Ministry Network will share our significant innovations including theme groups, short-term groups, groups in the community, use in Religious Education and by religious professionals. Date and time to be announced.

UUSGM Network Annual Meeting

The Annual Meeting of the UU Small Group Ministry Network will be held at GA in Portland. Details on the Meeting will be in an upcoming Issue of this Quarterly.

UUSGM Network Booth *An Opportunity to Help Out & Learn More about SGM*

The UU Small Group Ministry Network plans to have a booth in the Exhibit Hall again this year at General Assembly. If you would like to help staff our booth, please contact M'ellen Kennedy at mellen@smallgroupministry.net. Staffing the booth is a great opportunity to share your enthusiasm about and experience with Small Group Ministry. You also get to meet and learn from folks from all over the country who are engaged in this vital work. We'd love to have you join us!

Covenant Groups at GA On Hiatus In Portland 2007

Harlan Limpert, Director for District Services of the Unitarian Universalist Association, has announced that a decision has been made to take a one-year hiatus from having covenant groups at General Assembly. Plan on covenant groups returning to GA in 2008 -- bigger and stronger than ever. (Around 300 people participated last year!) If You have a story to share about your Covenant Group experience at GA in past years, please send it to mellen@smallgroupministry.net for inclusion in future issues of this Quarterly or in our Covenant Group News. We'd love to hear from you.

“Exploring Feminist Theologies:” Small Group Ministry Week

August 11 –17, 2007
Ferry Beach, Saco, ME

M'ellen Kennedy will be offering a Small Group Ministry related workshop this summer at Ferry Beach, the UU Camp in Saco, Maine. The workshop is part of the week-long camp “In The Company of Women.” This experience will be an opportunity for women to explore together feminist theologies and women's spirituality using the Small Group Ministry format. Along the way we'll reflect on issues such as the feminist tradition, images of the divine feminine, community, and more. Much of the time we'll work in small groups balancing discussion with expression through drawing, poetry, art and music. We'll finish with each woman sharing on an important theological insight gained from the week's experience.

The week will also provide training opportunities with workshops on an introduction to SGM and SGM facilitation skills The workshop leader, M'ellen Kennedy, is a UU community minister and community psychologist. This project stems in part from funding from the UU Women's Federation through a Margaret Fuller Award.

For more information about the week
<http://spaces.msn.com/members/itcw>

To register visit www.ferrybeach.org

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to Subscribe to this Quarterly?**

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The UU Small Group Ministry Network!

Individual: \$35US Annually (1 copy of Quarterly)
Congregation: \$60US Annually (6 copies of Quarterly)

New & Existing Members: To make our larger efforts to support this ministry possible, such as research and development of resources, we need your donations above your annual membership fee.

Additional Donation: \$100 \$250 \$500 \$ _____
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Donations to the Network are tax deductible. Please complete the form above and mail with your check made out to "UU SGM Network" to the UU SGM Network, Attn: Peter Bowden, 155 Evarts Street, Newport, RI 02840

You can also join and renew on-line: smallgroupministry.net

The Benefits of Network Membership:

1. Experiencing the joy of helping our grassroots Small Group Ministry movement flourish!
2. Getting the SGM Quarterly mailed to your home or congregation four times each year.
3. Receiving registration discounts when you attend UU SGM Network sponsored events.
4. Receiving assistance when you plan and offer a regional small group ministry event.
5. Participating as a voting member in the UUSGM Network Annual Meeting at General Assembly.

Please Consider Giving a Gift to the Network.

The UUSGM Quarterly

Editor: M'ellen Kennedy

Feature Articles in Future Issues

Spring 2007 Various Models of Small Group Ministry
Summer 2007 Facilitator Training
Fall 2007 Please let us know what topic would you like to see covered.

Subscribe to the Covenant Group News

Keep up on news about Small Group Ministry and Covenant Groups with the monthly free e-news, "Covenant Group News." The newsletter was started by Bob Hill and is now published by the UU Small Group Ministry Network. If you're not already a subscriber, to sign up, visit our website www.smallgroupministry.net

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