

# U.U. Small Group Ministry Quarterly



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## Together for Good: Small Group Ministries in the Large Congregation

Rev. Scott Gerard Prinster, Madison, WI

*"There came a time when the risk to remain tight in the bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom."*

-- Anaïs Nin

When I moved from a ministry with a small congregation to my current work with First Unitarian Society of Madison, Wisconsin, I was surprised at how different the nature of my work became. The average size of a UU congregation is about 150 members, so programming tends to be aimed at the assumptions and dynamics of smaller groups. **Adapting programs like Covenant Group Ministry to a large congregation is therefore not always as simple as we'd expect.**

But this work of reshaping Covenant Groups to the needs of a large congregation is very much worth it. Of the ministry I've done here in the last four years, **there's nothing I credit more for growing the health of this congregation and multiplying my effectiveness as a minister. The intentionality and principles of Covenant Groups are just what the large congregation needs to move beyond the barriers keeping us from deeper community and broader vision.**

The attitudes that prevent many small congregations from growing are surprisingly also an issue in the largest congregations -- indeed, these just seem to be part of the human condition in community. Even with 1,400 members, I still occasionally hear "but I'm afraid I won't know everyone if we grow any larger." I recognize that part of what they really mean is "I'm afraid I won't *be known* if we grow." It's easy for members to feel that they'll no longer matter to others there, that being one of many will mean that they're insignificant. **But what better way to recognize their inherent worth and dignity than through the deep listening and authentic relationships of a Covenant Group?** In the five years that First Unitarian has enjoyed our small group ministries, **it's palpable how much healthier the web of our relationships has become; from my perspective, it has significantly relieved our fear of continued growth.**

Too many Unitarian Universalists conceptualize life in our congregations primarily in terms of individual satisfaction at the expense of the community's health. I don't think that there exists another mainstream religious movement that has so deeply institutionalized the attribute of selfishness. However, as more of our members have their most powerful moments in a Covenant Group as well as in worship services or adult education courses, it is community that they come to us for, rather than personal

(Continued on page 2)

## Small Group Ministry In the Small Congregation

Rev. Jane Dwinell, Montpelier, VT

Small Church Specialist for the Northeast District

Over and over, people say the reason they love their small congregation is because of the intimacy it provides. Sometimes people say, "We don't need a Small Group Ministry program... we're already a small group!"

But a **Small Group Ministry program is different than being a small group. It is an intentional way to deepen spiritually, and to really get to know a group of people.** It is a simple way to become intimate and honest with one another, and to learn to care for one another in times of joy and in times of need -- something that doesn't always happen at Social Hour.

In a small congregation, we have more opportunities to get to know each other in informal ways. Social Hour is not crowded, and we can walk up to anyone and start a conversation. But how deep can we go? There's probably only time to chat a little about the sermon, or the music, or the weather, or the yummy cake being served. **At Social Hour, there isn't the time, or the atmosphere, to really sit down and have a deep, and safe conversation.** Perhaps the sermon triggered feelings of loss, or feelings of fear. Can you imagine sharing that over a cup of coffee in the fellowship hall while small children are buzzing around, and people are soliciting volunteers for the next fundraiser? Can you imagine being moved to question different aspects of your life, and then share it with someone at the back of the sanctuary or on the front lawn?

**Small Group Ministry groups provide safety, and a quiet time set aside specifically for deep and intimate sharing.** Small Groups meet somewhere that feels comfortable to their members. They meet for a specific period of time, with a specific covenant, at specific intervals of time. The structure is such to allow people to be ready to open up, listen, learn, and share.

And with that basis of intimacy and trust developed in the Small Group, the rest of congregational life becomes more fun and vital. Small Group members are more likely to come to worship -- to see the members of their group. Small Group members are more likely to volunteer for church projects and church leadership positions -- they are grateful to their congregation for the Small Group experience and want to give back.

(Continued on page 2)



## Using Small Group Ministry in the Metro Atlanta Spiritual Retreat

Rev. Marti Keller, Decatur, GA

Unitarian Universalist ministers from the Metro Atlanta area held their first ever spiritual retreat this spring, an opportunity for clergy and lay members to rest, relax, and reflect together. The weekend getaway, held at a nearby Ignatious Catholic Center, was built around sharing favorite spiritual practices. Designed into each day were opportunities for different styles of worship, including a Friday night Sabbath service, complete with blessing the wine and the challah bread. There were also times for trying out yoga exercises, Zen Buddhist meditation, praying through collage pictures, singing and chanting, and devotional reading.

I chose to share my abiding love for and commitment to small groups as a key spiritual practice, based on over a decade of my own participation in and leadership of covenant groups within and outside of UU congregations. **My colleagues in the Metro Atlanta UU Clergy Cluster enthusiastically agreed to incorporate small groups into the daily schedule of the retreat and to act as facilitators.** We offered three time slots for meeting in groups, the initial Friday evening gathering devoted to establishing three "agreements" or behavioral covenant; asking participants what they gave up to attend the retreat; and asking that they briefly share the spiritual question they had been asked to bring into the weekend.

For the two other Small Group segments, I selected two sessions from the Small Group Ministry Session Book developed by Reverend Calvin O. Dame and the Community UU Church of Augusta, Maine. **One was on spiritual longing and the other on spiritual practices as part of individual development.**

While all activities at the retreat were optional, most of the attendees chose to participate in the small groups. **Overall, both the participants and facilitators felt that they benefited from the experience,** whether they participated in small group ministry programs in their home congregation or if this was their first exposure.

**The Small Group experience gave each person a chance to voice questions of deep personal significance that he or she had not asked before, observed Rev. Dr. Paula Gable,** associate minister for the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Atlanta. Paula attended last summer's Ferry Beach Small Group Ministry Conference and was one of the facilitators for the Atlanta spiritual retreat groups. Paula reports that "Once the questions took shape, the answers began to emerge within these circles of trust and caring. Some of the questions posed included 'What is the meaning of life and how do I live it?' 'Are life events a matter of random chance or cosmic order?' 'How do I find God/Truth/Meaning while struggling with the crushing demands of a full-time job and child-rearing?'"

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## The UU Small Group Ministry Network (UUSGM Network)

*Our Mission:*

*"To help create healthy congregations  
and a vital Unitarian Universalist movement by  
supporting Small Group Ministry."*

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The UU Small Group Ministry Network is a membership based Independent Affiliate Organization of the Unitarian Universalist Association (see [uua.org](http://uua.org)). The purpose of the Network is to support small group ministry and related shared ministry models in Unitarian Universalist congregations through developing new resources, networking and training opportunities.

### Joining the Network

For info on joining and benefits of membership,  
see the back page of this Quarterly,  
or visit [www.smallgroupministry.net](http://www.smallgroupministry.net)

**Time to renew? Check your mailing label.**

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### Board & Staff

Rev. Calvin Dame, President  
Elizabeth Barrett  
Susan Hollister, Treasurer  
Rev. Marti Keller  
Sue Stuke, Secretary  
Rev. Helen Zidowecki

#### Advisory Board

Rev. Bob Hill  
Rev. Glenn Turner



#### Co-ordinators

Peter Bowden  
M'ellen Kennedy

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### We Welcome Your Gift to the Network

For the UU Small Group Ministry Network to accomplish our mission, we need adequate funding. We are funded by the Fund for Unitarian Universalism and by our members. There is much work to be done to support Small Group Ministry in our congregations. And we want to do it! In order to take on the needed research and resource development projects we need your support. **Your donation to the UUSGM Network is tax deductible.** We thank our members for their support and welcome additional financial contributions.

**For more info on making tax deductible donations,  
please contact Peter Bowden at 401-855-0037.**

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### SGM in a Spiritual Retreat (Cont. from previous column)

**The response to the experience of these very quickly formed and short-lived groups was mostly positive.** At the same time, some individuals felt like it was too temporary a gathering to do any meaningful spiritual work and commenting that they were unclear how much disclosure was appropriate and/or how much feedback was desirable. Others told us that the little over an hour set aside for each session was too brief. **Facilitators agreed that it may have been more helpful to have established the ground rules before the weekend began, with confidentiality and non-judging being key**

**"Although we did not come up with definite answers to any of these questions we posed, Paula noted, "we did find ways to live within the tension between the certain and the uncertain. And, we all agreed that we felt supported in our shared spiritual quest as Unitarian Universalists."**

## Contingency Planning For Covenant Groups

J. P. DeMeritt, Houston, TX

**Since June of 2005, we at Bay Area UU Church in Houston, Texas, have had a number of unforeseen incidents ranging from the mundane to the monumental.**

For example, two of our covenant group members had a house fire. We had to evacuate because Hurricane Rita threatened our area. One of our newly founded group's leader had a personal emergency taking her out of town – and didn't yet have an alternate leader to facilitate a scheduled meeting. Another group with co-facilitators was almost unable to meet because one facilitator got sick and the other had a personal emergency. I don't think we've faced everything that could go wrong, but we've had a lot to think about!

**This tells me we need to plan for contingencies. These are the sometimes unpredictable, but often identifiable, circumstances that can disrupt single meetings or whole small group ministry programs.** When Hurricane Rita threatened, many of our groups were unable to meet for two weeks or more. And what we learned is that if we had planned for some of these possibilities, we would have better served our members and the congregation as a whole. So here are a few brief guidelines for contingency planning.

In your SGM Steering Committee or planning group, first, **brainstorm all the possible events you can think of that might disrupt your group's activities.** At this point, don't throw out anything. Does your group meet outdoors? Will a storm disrupt your meeting? Then it's a contingency to plan for. And don't think that any event is too small or too unlikely to cause problems. In a small group, one member missing can make meetings difficult – especially if that one member's the facilitator!

Next, **try grouping contingencies together by looking for common threads between them.** Are there warnings for some of the contingencies you face? Many weather-related emergencies may be forecast hours to days ahead, giving your group time to prepare. Others may occur with little or no warning. A waterline break in a church restroom could quickly render the building unusable: would you be prepared? Other disruptions may be planned well in advance. Sometime this fall or winter, we'll be expanding our facility, and once we break ground, portions of the church – including parts where a number of our groups meet – will be unusable. All of these different contingencies may call for different responses, but some of those responses may be remarkably similar.

Third, **look for alternatives. Some may be obvious, like moving a meeting from the church to someone's home or vice versa.** Others – like how to meet people's needs to talk about their experiences despite being scattered to the four winds – may take more creative problem solving. In any case, look for all the alternatives you can.

Fourth, **decide which alternatives make the most sense for your group.** If a facilitator gets sick, you might be able to borrow a facilitator from another group for a meeting.

(Continued on page 6)

## Comments on the Small Group Ministry Week at Ferry Beach by 2005 Attendees

Ken Wagner, Marlborough, MA

“During the week, we had the opportunity to learn the essential elements of a successful SGM program, how to plan and implement a new program, how to expand and enhance an existing covenant group program, how to identify and train facilitators, how to write effective SGM sessions, and how to incorporate SGM practices into relational religious education. Apart from the formal sessions, we had a wonderful time sharing stories, moving experiences, hilarious mistakes, astonishing songs, exotic haikus and quiet walks on the beach.

**“However, the most moving and powerful experience of the week was a feature very inconspicuously described in the SMG Network materials as “Hands on Small Group Experience.”** We were formed into small groups, and conducted actual one hour sessions each day using common small group topics. Despite being together for less than a week, and despite the workshop nature of the exercise, I emerged connected to six very special people in a way I wasn't before Ferry Beach. **If any of us didn't fully grasp the power of small groups before this experience, we certainly came out the other side comprehending it.** We need to enlist this power in our religious life.”

Rev. Bill Breeden, Bloomington, IN

**“I encourage the professional ministers in the UUA to give SGM serious consideration. Be forewarned, once started, it may be difficult to contain.** My Pappy used to say, ‘If a church gets on fire for Jesus, folks'll come around to watch 'em burn.’” Well, my theology has changed radically since I heard Pappy say that, but the principle is sound. When people find good news they tend to share it and others come to the fire to be warmed.

“Come on in from the cold. **Small group ministry will give you a fire around which to gather and to be. It has the potential to make Unitarian Universalism a revolutionary rather than a resolutory movement.”**

Elizabeth U Cobblah, Maynard, MA

**“The staff members – five ministers by training or by calling, covered different aspects of SGM so that they functioned smoothly together as the distinct fingers and thumb of a creative, caring hand delivering a strong program and clear message....**

“The pace of the conference was ideal and included time for reflection, rest, beach-going etc between meetings and workshops....**We all came away with vital kernels of understanding that have been sprouting and taking root in our lives and churches.** An image of self as a vessel ready to receive, to carry and to offer is one of many that has stayed with me. In addition, we all probably felt the duo, intimacy and ultimacy, a *raison d'être* and an outcome of the program. Experiencing it, learning to cultivate it, being embraced by August warmth and fellowship at the ocean's edge were almost enough to sustain some of us for several years!”

# Small Group Ministry Network Institute

## August 12 – August 18, 2006

### Ferry Beach, UU Conference Center

### Saco, Maine



The Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network is delighted to offer an opportunity for teams and individuals from congregations of all sizes to learn and practice Small Group Ministry (SGM) with experienced practitioners and leaders. The week will include presentations, hands-on workshops, small group ministry experience, sharing, networking, music and art. We'll address the following topics:

- ❑ **Starting SGM from scratch in a congregation**
- ❑ **Expanding and enhancing existing SGM programs**
- ❑ **Exploring SGM in Lifespan Religious Education**
- ❑ **Helping SGM Program coordinators master their job**
- ❑ **Preparing and supporting facilitators in their important work**
- ❑ **Helping ministers work comfortably and constructively with SGM**
- ❑ **Revitalizing congregations with SGM**
- ❑ **Creating effective SGM sessions**
- ❑ **Using art, music, movement and alternative approaches in SGM**
- ❑ **Exploring SGM as related to Social Justice and Faith in Action**
- ❑ **Sharing materials that participants bring from their congregations**
- ❑ **Taking home a vision and action plan for SGM**

Mornings will include presentations, discussion and workshops; evenings will have further optional programs and related activities. Afternoons are for relaxing on the beach, lounging on the porch, exploring the environs through organized outings, and other activities. **Participants will have the unique and uplifting opportunity of meeting daily in a hands-on small group.** The conference will be especially effective for groups representing their congregations and all are welcome.

**Instructors:** Dr. M'ellen Kennedy, MDiv, Rev. Helen Zidowecki,  
Peter Bowden, Elizabeth Barrett, Susan Hollister and others.

**Imagine enjoying the beach, worshipping among the pines, making new friends, sensing our history, and participating in rejuvenating our Unitarian Universalist movement with Small Group Ministry – all in a week this summer!**

#### ***Comments From Last Year's Ferry Beach Participants:***

*"The staff of this workshop have such amazing gifts, knowledge and excitement, that I want to see all this more widely shared!"*

*"I'll go back with ideas on how to design and implement the SGM program in my congregation, solid concepts and practical experience gleaned from others."*

*"It offered experiences I did not expect – surpassed my expectations. Small groups were wonderful. I'm taking back a deeper sense of what is possible for how we relate with each other, for our program, and what transformation might look like for our church community."*

*"Thank you, thank you. It was a powerful experience for me personally and I'm looking forward to sharing what I've learned with my congregation. Thank you for all the work and care you took in putting together a meaningful and practical conference."*

*"I'm bringing home more organization for our SGM program, and inspiration and tools to make it better."*

*"One of the high points of my life so far!" (No kidding! A Ferry Beacher actually said this months later!)*

**To register and for more information, visit [www.ferrybeach.org](http://www.ferrybeach.org)**



# Small Group Ministry at General Assembly 2006

## St. Louis, MO, June 21-25, 2006

Once a year representatives and members of our Unitarian Universalist congregations and organizations gather for our General Assembly (GA). This year, GA will be in St. Louis, and will feature opportunities for Small Group Ministry or Covenant Groups, including the following workshops.



### #2003 Small Group Ministry: Enhancing Faith in Action

*Northeast District*

*Thursday, June 22, 8 - 9:15 AM, America's Center 242*

Explore how Small Group Ministry enhances service to the congregation and the larger community and how service vitalizes Small Group Ministry. Explore the connection, share your stories. Faith in action is a result of spiritual community and connectedness.

Presenters: Rev. Judith Smith-Valley, Rev. Helen Zidowecki

### #3021 Introduction to Small Group Ministry

*UU Small Group Ministry Network*

*Friday, June 23, 11AM - 12:15 PM, America's Center 266*

Small Group Ministry (SGM) or Covenant Groups are being used successfully in hundreds of congregations to build community and encourage deeper spiritual exploration. This workshop will provide an introduction to SGM, how and why it works, and to the essential components of a healthy SGM program.

Presenters: M'ellen Kennedy, Elizabeth Barrett, Rev. Marti Keller

### #3049 Accessing Women's Heritage Through Small Group Ministry

*UU Women's Heritage Society*

*Friday, June 23, 2:15 - 3:30 PM, America's Center 262*

Experience and develop Small Group Ministry Sessions that bring the lives and words of UU women to today's congregations. Balance historic information and dialogue to create materials to use in your own setting, and ways to engage your own story. Take-home packers will be available.

Presenters: Rev. Helen Zidowecki, Phyllis Rickter

### #3082 Strengthening Existing Small Group Ministry Programs

*UU Small Group Ministry Network*

*Friday, June 23, 4-5:15 PM, America's Center 241*

*#4022 Repeat Programming Sat., June 24 8:30-9:45 AM,  
America's Center 262*

Small Group Ministry or Covenant Groups, are transforming our congregations by encouraging deeper spiritual growth and the development of friendships. This workshop will focus on the leverage points for strengthening or revitalizing an existing program. We will explore how to maintain a healthy program and avoid and overcome common pitfalls.

Presenters: M'ellen Kennedy, Rev. Helen Zidowecki.

### UUSGM Network Booth #423

The UU Small Group Ministry Network will have a booth in the Exhibit Hall again this year. Please come by and visit us! Find out more about Small Group Ministry and Covenant Groups; learn about the UU Small Group Ministry Network, join the Network, find out about our Ferry Beach SGM week in August; pick up some of our free literature; consult with experienced SGM participants about your program; purchase SGM Quarterlies and the "Small Group Ministry with Youth" session book by Rev. Helen Zidowecki. We'd love to see You!

#### Booth Hours

**Wednesday Noon to 7PM**

**Thursday through Saturday 11 AM to 7 PM**

**Sunday 9 AM to 1 PM**

### UUSGM Network Annual Meeting

The Annual Meeting of the UU Small Group Ministry Network will be held at GA in St. Louis on Saturday, June 24<sup>th</sup> at 11 AM. Please gather at the SGM Network Booth #423. We'll move to a table in the nearby Lounge Area in the Exhibit Hall. At our annual meeting we'll celebrate the great accomplishments of our busy year. We'll hear reports from Rev. Calvin Dame, President, Susan Hollister, Treasurer, hold election of board members, and conduct the business of the organization. Please join us.

### Covenant Groups at General Assembly

This year about 300 individuals will have the wonderful opportunity to experience Covenant Groups at GA. This is a chance to meet new people and have deeper conversations in the bustle of GA. Pre-registration was required (there is no on-site registration). If you are registered already, here are the details:

Facilitator training conducted by Rev. Connie Grant and members of the UU Small Group Ministry Network Board and Staff will be held on Wednesday, June 21, 1:30 - 2:30 PM. Covenant Groups will meet in assigned rooms at these four times:

Thursday, June 22 11:15 AM - 12:45 PM

Friday, June 23 12:30 PM - 2:00 PM

Saturday, June 24 12:30 PM - 2:00 PM

Sunday, June 25 8:00 AM - 9:15 am

There will also be a debriefing and celebration for facilitators (with hors d'oeuvres) on Sunday, June 25, 6:15 - 7:45 PM (attendance at this event is encouraged, but not required).

**Time To Renew? Check Your Mailing Label!**

**Do You Want  
to Subscribe to this Quarterly?**

**Become a Member of**

**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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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](http://smallgroupministry.net)

**We Welcome Your Gift to the Network.**

**UU Small Group Ministry Network  
155 Evarts Street  
Newport, RI 02840**

**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. Accessing great members-only resources through our website.
4. Receiving registration discounts when you attend UU SGM Network sponsored events.
5. Receiving assistance when you plan and offer a regional small group ministry event.
6. Participating as a voting member in the UUSGM Network Annual Meeting at General Assembly.

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**The UUSGM Quarterly**

**Editor: M'ellen Kennedy**

The UUSGM Quarterly provides information, explores issues and shares resources on Small Group Ministry or Covenant Groups. It is funded primarily by a grant from the Fund for Unitarian Universalism and our members like you. Do you have a SGM experience to share, or a testimonial, or an exciting aspect of the SGM program in your congregation? Please send your submissions, your ideas and requests for topics to [mellen@smallgroupministry.net](mailto:mellen@smallgroupministry.net).

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