

SMALL GROUP MINISTRY TODAY

Twenty years of dedication and growth

What draws people to a congregation, and what keeps them connected? This is what, twenty years ago, Rev. Bob Hill, Executive Director of the Southwest District, and Rev. Glenn Turner, of the Northeast District asked as they started looking at the issue of growing UU congregations. Both Bob and Glenn were aware of the statement made about 1980 by James Luther Adams, a prominent Unitarian Universalist minister, that people come looking for *Intimacy* and *Ultimacy*.

Glenn Turner had introduced “relational” focus to the congregations in the Northeast District, tied in with The Twelve Keys to an Effective Church by Kennon Callahan. Callahan focused on the relational keys and the functional keys. The logistics of keeping a church running (functional keys) were to support people and connections (relational keys). Add to this evangelical Christian leader Carl George’s Meta-Church movement, which focused on groups of 10 people within congregations or congregations made up of small groups. The title of Bob Hill’s book, *The Complete Guide to Small Group Ministry: Saving the World, Ten at a Time*, is a direct connection to this evangelical approach. It was the focus of Bob and Glenn on these factors - growth, relations grounded in Intimacy and Ultimacy, and the use of small groups - that created Covenant Groups (Bob Hill’s term) and the Small Group Ministry (Glenn Turner’s term) movement.

Thandeka, who has been part of Small Group Ministry since its inception, wrote this in the Foreword of Bob Hill’s book published in June 2003:

“Small Group Ministry is the hope of our movement. This Guide to Small Group Ministry documents, explains, describes, and encourages the small wonders in our lives that make believers of us all. Bob Hill knows that our Unitarian Universalist belief in human dignity is not a creed; it’s a liturgical practice. He knows that we are a community of communities, a congregation of congregations, a people who practice right relationship as Small Group Ministry for ourselves, for each other, and for the world. Seeing is believing.

As Unitarian Universalists, we affirm right relationship as a reverential act. This affirmation is our covenantal act together as a noncreedal people. This is our religious history. Today, we are doing it ten at a time as an embedded ritual practice of our congregations.

Why does the new form of Small Group Ministry work so well for us today? Why is this ministry transforming our religious movement? Why do so many participants feel new joy and fulfillment and discover new meaning in their lives when they follow the simple, covenantal procedures for practicing right relationship in these small group settings?

Thanks to Bob’s book, the answers to these questions are at hand. The techniques, models, references, and suggestions needed to understand, practice, develop, or simply to begin this work are right here. Bob’s answers are not doctrinal. They are as concrete as a human heart that is no longer lonely, warm as the place of human embrace that rekindles the sacred ground of our faith.

Bob had to write this book. He could not remain silent because this movement in our midst has transformed him. He’s really a Covenant Group practical evangelist. As a minister, he’s got the vision; as a district executive, he attends to the structural issues and concerns; and as a veteran journalist, he records the detail. The transformative power of his work is in its concreteness. Salvation is not theory

here. It's meeting time. Community action. Personal commitment. Praxis. It's the place where the stranger is no longer alone."

The Basic Elements of Small Group Ministry that are available in the *SGM Journal Fall 2017* and are on the Network Home Page are based on the descriptions of Bob Hill in his book and the writings of Glenn Turner. The Basic Elements give the parameters and intent of Small Group Ministry, with implementation varied to meet the interests and needs of the congregation or organizing group. Bob Hill's book remains a classic in this regard: defining the elements, and giving feedback from those who developed programs around organizational issues. *Implementing Small Group Ministry* from the Network provides options that have been shared over the years.

At this twenty-year mark in the life of UU Small Group Ministry, we have gathered reflections and comments and have noted trends over the years as Small Group Ministry has evolved – and continues to evolve.