

Starting Small Group Ministry in a Lay-Led Congregation

By Gary Borg

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Pilgrim House UU Fellowship, a lay-led congregation, is a new member of the UU Small Group Ministry Network. Initially a group four of us met to talk about how people could connect with one another.

In early 2016, a visiting ministerial candidate suggested we try covenant groups. We invited two more group members and started a trial group using “Heart to Heart” by Christine Robinson and Alicia Hawkins.

Each covenant group meeting has a facilitator and the content for each meeting is based on a theme such as compassion, friendship, gratitude, and loss just to name a few. Members of the group make a commitment to share deeply, build connections, practice deliberate listening and to respect each other’s sharing and thoughts.

There is a covenant or ground rules that we all agree to and each meeting follows a preset format. Our meetings have been lasting about 1.5 hours. Members are expected to commit to coming to the meetings, doing the assigned reading in the book (short chapters) ahead of time, and to be respectful of the format and each other’s thoughts. Groups may decide to use other books or readings as they wish.

In the summer of 2016, another group was formed. In the fall, more members signed up and we were able to start a third covenant group. In the fall of 2017, we started a fourth group. Groups meet after the Sunday program. They have been well attended and this will be our fourth year starting in September.

For a congregation of about 85 members, this response seemed to indicate that covenant groups were filling a need. Some groups have also used Robinson & Hawkins’ “Soul to Soul” and “A Mayo Clinic Handbook to Happiness.” The latter resource has practical exercises on acceptance, meaning, and forgiveness. It’s all about finding happiness when things are going very wrong, but it is also important when things are going well.

We were providing little support for our groups, we lacked a good plan for evaluating group success and were looking for advice on finding session plans. An initial contact with the Small Group Ministry Network resulted in a conversation with Helen Zidowecki. We followed up with a conference call with Helen and representatives from our covenant groups. The calls resulted in a wealth of ideas. Most importantly, it energized our group members. We also now have ideas for developing a strategy to make our covenant groups more effective.

Thanks to those of you who contributed to and supported Small Group Ministry over the years, and to Helen for her advice.