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A Visit from St. Peter

*by Steve Becker, Westside Unitarian Universalist Congregation, Seattle, Washington
(with apologies to C.C. Moore and Peter Morales)*

'Twas the night before Christmas, it was just before eight,
No covenant group stirring, they were all running late.

Topic handouts were slung by the couches with care
In hopes that our covenant group soon would be there.

The members arrived, some were thinking ahead,
While visions of Principles danced in their heads.

Our Facilitator in her kerchief while looking assured
Had just settled down for the Opening Words.

When out on the lawn there arose such a clatter,
I glanced up from my UU World to see what was the matter.

Away to the window I ran with no beacon
Stopped reading the Intro to see who was freakin'.

The moon on the breast of the new-fallen snow
Gave intimacy and ultimacy to the searches we know.

When, what to my liberal eyes should appear,
But a Toyota Hybrid pulled by eight tiny reindeer.

With a little old driver with no doctrinal creed,
I know in a moment it must be St. Pete.

More rapid than pledges his coursers they came,
And he whistled, and shouted, and called them by name;

"Now, Forrest! Now, Ginny! Now, Bob Hill and Glenn!
This group needs new topics, and just a few men!"

To the top of the porch! To the top of the wall!
Now dash away! Dash away! Dash, Mike Durall!"

As Unitarians before evangelicals fly,
When they meet with an obstacle, mount to the sky;

So up to the house-top the Unitarians flew,
With the sleigh full of topics, and St. Peter too.

And then, in a twinkling, I heard on the roof
Secular humanists gathering, just to find proof.

As I returned to my group and settled them down,
Down the chimney St. Peter came with a bound.

He was dressed in faux fur, from his head to his foot,
And his clothes were all tarnished from his Phoenix mug shoot.

A bundle of topics he had flung on his back,
And he looked like a Facilitator wanting feedback.

His eyes—how they twinkled! His quotations how merry!
His questions like roses, no matter the query!

Quotations he cited without the least care,
And scarfing a cookie, he took the empty chair.

All our Principles he held tight in his teeth,
Respect for the web encircled his head like a wreath,

He had a smart face, lots of inherent worth
You could see his strong faith, despite his wide girth.

He was chubby and plump, a right jolly UU,
And I laughed when I saw him, and learned something new.

A wink of his eye, his service project was clear!
World community would be ours by the end of the year!

He spoke not a word, but went straight to his work,
Went through all the questions; then turned with a jerk,

With mystery and miracle seen as no bother,
And giving a nod, we all accepted one another.

He sprang to his sleigh, to his team gave a shrill,
And away they all flew like a pledge unfulfilled.

But I heard him exclaim, Unison Affirmation in sight
"Peace, liberty, justice for all! and to all a good night!"



Program Notes

Budgeting for Small Group Ministry

By Diana Dorroh, Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge, Louisiana

As many budgets are being drafted or finalized, it's a good time to consider the actual costs of a healthy small group ministry program (SGM) and how to justify them. The May 2010 Issue of Covenant Group News, available on the UU SGM Network website, presents five categories of SGM program benefits: Connection, Ministry, Maturational and Incarnational Growth, Strengthening and Enriching the Congregation, and Transforming the World. You might consider presenting the entire list to your Board as justification for your small group ministry program budget or for increasing the budget to expand your program. The Board is likely to focus on the most attention-getting item: SGM's potential to achieve numerical membership growth. A board member might ask you, "How can small group ministry help us grow?"

A healthy small group ministry program can affect every aspect of church growth. The most tangible ways it affects *numerical* growth are 1) increased new member retention and 2) reduction of membership loss during a crisis. An organized effort to get new members into groups during their first year and keep them there for two or three years can greatly reduce your new member losses. People come to our congregations looking for connection and spiritual growth. Both are easily provided by membership in a covenant group. Over about five years, this effort will result in a program that includes half of your membership. And during an institutional crisis, a large small group ministry program can hold the community together and give members a way of processing their losses. There are numerous stories from congregations that have used these strategies and experienced the benefits.

The costs of a healthy, growing small group ministry program are:

- Ministerial time and energy
- Church Leadership commitment
- Staff Time: ¼ - ½ time paid coordinator, depending on church size
- Leadership Training: \$300 - \$800 each to attend the annual UU Small Group Ministry Institute
- Membership in UU SGM Network - \$100 per year
- Books and Resources: \$20 - \$100

I believe it makes sense to increase your commitment to small group ministry during a period of financial challenge. It's a good deal, because it's shared ministry. The minister shares with the leaders and the leaders share with group members, so the workload is distributed and more ministry happens. Is it free? With a dedicated super-volunteer, it can be free for a short time, but why not dedicate or increase funds this year and build the modest costs into your budget plans over the next few years, so that your church can rely on all the potential benefits of a successful small group ministry program.

Diana directs the covenant group program at the Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge, LA, where 65% of the congregation belongs to a "Branches" group. Since the program's start 11 years ago, the congregation has grown by 33%, from 300 to 400 members.

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Minister's Page

Re-Vitalizing Small Group Ministry

Reverend Priscilla Richter, First Unitarian Society of Schenectady, New York

Small group ministry is a passion of mine from my first experience with self-help groups when I was a social worker almost 30 years ago. I witnessed these structured groups providing real support and healing time after time.

When small group ministry programs came along, I instinctively knew that this was a great way to help our members make powerful connections with one another, to deepen spiritually, and to develop the ability to not only articulate our UU faith, but to live it day to day.

For any congregation, these groups must be carefully tended in order to realize their full potential. When I arrived here in Schenectady, a small group ministry program was five years old. Facilitation was rotated among the group members. Groups had the same membership year after year. Sessions were the responsibility of each group. One group said that it did little more than check-in for their allotted time. They didn't engage in service. In short, these groups were not accountable and operated independently. The number of groups dwindled over time.

It was clear that this program needed revitalization. I convened a planning team committed to renewing the promise of small group ministry.

Here's what we did:

- ☒ We recruited dedicated facilitators for the groups, trained them, and brought them together monthly to meet and exchange information.
- ☒ We made the covenant central to the group structure and renamed our small group ministry Covenant Circles.
- ☒ Each group followed the same session: I write the sessions and often incorporate recent sermon topics. This cross-fertilization has many benefits.
- ☒ Each group was required to do a service project for the congregation and in the community. After initial resistance, people now love doing this.

As with any change, we experienced some tensions that first year. But most of the participants re-signed for the following year and new people joined a Covenant Circle for the second year of our revitalized program.

Here's What We've Learned: We are now in year three of our rebirth. Our small group ministry program ultimately serves the mission of the church, which is a higher value than the desires of each group.

Our congregation has experienced many newcomers who have wanted to join our Covenant Circles *now*, not when we have a new sign-up period. We had placed a high value on the bonding experience in each group and opened to new members a couple of times a year. We realized that connecting newcomers to small group ministry was an act of hospitality, which became a higher value than group bonding.

Our ongoing learning is about flexibility and resilience: people are busy and find it difficult to commit to extended time frames. We are now experimenting with groups of 3, 6, or 9 month levels of commitment. We have not done this long enough to evaluate the results.

Small group ministry remains relevant and needed in our congregations -- perhaps more now than ever. Revitalization is, then, like cultivating a garden that needs tender loving care to keep producing its bounty.

From Our Members.....

“And the East German judge gives her a 4.7”

By Carol Klitzner, Small Group Ministry Chair,
Unitarian Universalist Congregation at Shelter Rock, Manhasset, NY

Small Group Ministry at UUCSR is in its eleventh year, with about 60 participants in six groups. We emphasize training our facilitators to ensure the quality of our program remains high. We invited two trainers from the SGM Network to present our Fall 2009 training. Our February 2010 training was designed as self-training time, where we would gain from each other's expertise.

The Olympics

We started with a warm-up exercise where teams of facilitators were challenged to come up with an “elevator speech” for Small Group Ministry. An elevator speech should deliver the essence of an idea in the time it takes an elevator to get to the ground floor. Amid some hilarity, teams were scored on technical merit and artistic impression. The Gold Medal went to:

“Small Group Ministry is a group of about eight or so people that meets once a month for two hours to talk about the deeper matters and big questions of life that you don't usually get a chance to discuss. It gives you an opportunity to meet people and get to know them at a deeper level since we all listen as one person talks. Everyone gets a chance to talk without interruption about what they're thinking and feeling right then in their life.”

The Challenges

The majority of the time was spent on a series of situations that challenge a group leader:

*Too Deep Sharing Cross-Talker Person Who Offers Advice
Exhibitionist Hijacker Strong Opinions Silent One*

For each, we had a brief scenario like this one for **Too Deep Sharing**:

Participant "Holidays are tough for me and always have been. My dad is an alcoholic and so every holiday was basically ruined by his behavior. I remember when I was 10 he showed up totally drunk at the end of our holiday meal. ..."

Problem for facilitators: Is this sharing going to get too deep and make the participant have regrets later or make the group uncomfortable? What do you do?

We brainstormed how to handle each scenario. For Too Deep Sharing, our responses were:

Use the introduction to the check-in to set limits:

- Say something like “we'll take no more than two minutes per person.” (Then you can gently stop any person when the time limit is reached.)
- Especially if you have people who are going over their past history, use prompts like “Focus on what's happening now in our lives.” “What is on your heart and mind right now?”

Responding to the speaker:

- Go by your own reactions and a quick look around at the group to see whether this is indeed too deep. People may look at you if they are uncomfortable.
- You do not need to acknowledge the specific content.
- Hold the group in silence.
- If this becomes a pattern, offer help from the minister afterwards, privately.
- Interrupt with a statement such as “I think this is going beyond the group's ability to address..” or “beyond the scope of SGM to handle...” but acknowledge how good it feels that someone trusted the group enough to speak so deeply.
- It is OK to clarify what level of sharing is comfortable for all. Ground rules make everyone more secure.
- Remind at end of check-in to hold what's shared in confidence, especially if something very deep has been shared.

Working through the scenarios gave us tools to handle these tough situations and also gave us more confidence in our own skills as facilitators.

Young Adult Small Group Ministry at USG

By Andrea Bernstein, The Unitarian Society of Germantown, Philadelphia, PA

Covenant groups are a powerful tool for connecting young adults in church communities. At The Unitarian Society of Germantown (USG), these covenant groups are referred to as Small Group Ministry. Within the program there are young adult groups made up of no more than 10 members. At USG the term “young adult” refers to individuals in their 20s, 30s and 40s. The previous model was a mix of age groups. We noticed, however, that there were very few opportunities for singles and married couples with or without children to connect in a meaningful way outside of Sunday worship. Newcomers, in particular, sought a deeper understanding of the church and the Unitarian Universalist principles and traditions. By developing a SGM group for young adults specifically, we were able to better meet the needs of our growing church community.

As a married working mother of two young children, SGM has been an amazing way for me to commit to broadening my spiritual life at USG and beyond. I was involved in the first Young Adult SGM group many years ago. Fairly new to Unitarian Universalism, it was a great way for me to meet other newcomers as well as those raised in the church like my husband. It was important that the group meet in the evenings after work in a specific location at church. At the first session we reviewed a covenant provided to us by the group leader. All members agreed to weekly attendance. It was stressed that this was not a “support” group but a unique opportunity for developing our spiritual selves in community.

At USG, each SGM session is conducted as a worship service. A theme for the year and weekly topics are chosen in advance by the SGM Committee led by the minister, a chair or co-chairs. The objective is spiritual reflection and discussion. All SGM groups use the same topic each month and the minister preaches on this theme in a sermon to further encourage conversation in the broader church community. The session begins with an opening and lighting of the chalice, then members share their joys and sorrows of the past week. This is followed by a time for “deep listening.” Each member shares their thoughts on the topic. This is not a time for discussion. There is no talking over anyone. It is purely a time for each person to make their voice heard. Young adult groups prefer more time allotted for this section. The leader keeps track of time so that each member has an equal opportunity to participate. Successful topics have been ones of particular interest to young adults such as defining one’s spiritual journey and big questions. Examples are our place in the universe, what happens when we die, religion in our lives, life goals, heroes, negative emotions, mindfulness and our relationship with the earth. A poem, reading or song closes the session with the extinguishing of the chalice while holding hands.

Strong bonds are formed in SGM’s intimate group setting. I have made lasting friendships with a diverse group of church members and visitors. SGM is a valuable way for young adult newcomers to gain a better understanding of the church and Unitarian Universalism while providing an opportunity for developing connections on a deeper level than at coffee hour or Sunday worship services. Young adult groups are essential to the growth of the church. Participants gravitate towards this unique opportunity to share their faith in small, welcoming groups. After meeting with the same individuals once a week for a year, SGM members become very comfortable with one another and feel more included in the church community. These are the individuals who choose to become church members and leaders of the younger generation.

**For each one of us there is a desert to travel,
a star to discover, and a being within
ourselves to bring to life.
- Edward Erickson**

On Holidays and Every Day, It's Relationships That Matter

by Michael D. Dalzell

Unitarian Universalist Church at Washington
Crossing, Titusville, New Jersey

As you make your way to grandmother's house for the holidays, here's a sobering statistic to ponder: One in four of us has nobody we're really close to. Nobody.

About four years ago, sociologists at Duke University found that **the average American can name two people they would consider a "confidant."** Worse, a quarter of the people who were surveyed had no close personal relationship to anyone with whom they could share their most intimate thoughts, fears, and desires.

"This study reveals a level of human isolation that is unprecedented in American life — and perhaps unprecedented in human history," Peter Morales, now president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, said after the researchers published their work in the *American Sociological Review*. "Americans are lonelier than they have ever been."

It's not easy to build close relationships in adulthood. Outside of marriage, domestic partnerships, and professions like the military and public safety — where bonds form around the fragility of life — it's hard to find someone who's truly got your back. Even in a house of worship, where we come together to forge our spiritual selves, it can take years for some people to feel like they fit in, and many people don't really feel that way until they become close to one or more people in the congregation.

That's where small group ministry comes in. In the past 10 years, there has been a fundamental shift in Unitarian Universalist congregations toward offering a spiritual experience through small groups (or *covenant* groups), says Peter Bowden, a Massachusetts-based freelance producer, consultant, and co-founder of the UU Small Group Ministry Network.

"Fundamentally, we are relational creatures," says Bowden. "Relationships and telling stories are so central to our being, it is hard to have a healthy, vital, dynamic, and meaningful faith community if you don't have an intentional way for people to come together to form strong and ongoing relationships."

Today, most Unitarian Universalist congregations offer one, two, or several small groups of 10 or fewer people. Some groups are built around a particular theme — with names like "Truth Seekers" or "women's spirituality circle" — but most come together organically, with group mates based on the luck of the draw.

That makes each group's collective environment very different. "One of strengths and challenges of small group ministry is that every group is going to be

different based on the people involved," says Bowden. "Whose lives are we using as springboards for our discussion? We look at different traditions and have readings from the world's wisdom, but then we start relating our life stories, trying to make sense of it. Who's in the room *does* make a difference."

At its core, small group ministry is a vehicle for meeting the needs of one another. "We provide a way to nurture the self in a way that is not just showing up for a worship service or for business," says Joe Schenk, small group ministry coordinator at the Unitarian Universalist Church at Washington Crossing (UUCWC), in Titusville, New Jersey.

Nurturing the self ultimately leads to nurturing one another. "Small group ministry offers a unique opportunity to develop deep friendships that provide meaning in the lives of individuals," says Rev. Charles J. Stephens, UUCWC's minister. "This ranges from having someone to talk with after a Sunday service to someone who will visit someone during a critical time in a person's life."

"The megachurches have been doing this for some time," says Schenk. "They realized a while ago that to have some level of connectedness with 600 people, they needed to do something" on a more intimate level with their members.

The same is true for Unitarian Universalist churches, says Schenk, who then recites the inside joke about joining a UU congregation: "People come looking to connect and for spirituality, and we welcome them and offer them committee work."

Connectedness, Bowden agrees, is one of the three big "what's in it for me" you'll get out of spiritual exploration through small group ministry (*meaning* and *getting in touch with your values* are the other two). "Amazing things come from just getting to know human beings that well in a way that's different from what you might get from a church coffee hour. Just knowing each other will lead to taking care of each other."

Michael Dalzell is part of a small group ministry at UUCWC that meets twice each month. Through the variety of topics his group has explored, Mike has discovered new ways to view spirituality and to see the divine in others.

This article originally appeared on Examiner.com (<http://www.examiner.com/unitarian-universalism-in-newark-on-thanksgiving-and-every-day-it-s-relationships-that-matter>) Printed by permission.

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Small Groups, Deep Connections.

Who We Are:

The UU Small Group Ministry Network is a non-profit, tax-exempt charitable organization under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. We provide support to small group ministry and related shared ministry models in UU congregations through developing new resources, networking, and training opportunities.

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Conference Notations

Southwest UU Conference Fall Leadership Conference

Rev. Steve Crump and Diana Dorroh from the Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge and Rev. Helen Zidowecki, UU SGM Network President, led a fifteen-hour track on Small Group Ministry at the Southwest UU Conference (SWUUC) Fall Leadership Conference in Dallas, TX. They were asked to explore effective ways of organizing and running a small group ministry program and to include ways of offering groups for people of all ages. Sixteen participants from twelve churches participated in the event.

Ten years ago, former SWUUC District Executive Rev. Bob Hill introduced covenant groups in the Southwest district and around the country. The enthusiasm he planted remains today. Participants came with pressing and challenging question about how to solve program problems and how to re-start stalled programs. Many congregations had included special interest or affinity groups in their programs, but felt that random groups with standard session plans might be more successful and increase participation. The presenters helped to develop strategies to keep what was working, while adding more random groups.

Rev. Steve Crump provided an overview on the purposes and unexpected consequences of small group ministry. As the minister of a church with a robust program that includes about 60% of the congregation, he was also able to speak from personal experience about the parish minister's role in leading and promoting the program, as well as sharing ministry with the covenant group leaders and supporting them in their work.

Rev. Helen Zidowecki conducted a workshop on covenant groups for all ages and explored strategies and resources to implement groups for young adults, youth, younger children, and multi-age groups. This is a special focus for the UU Small Group Ministry Network this year, as we continue our work with all the UUA districts, helping to build healthy small group ministry programs in all our congregations.

SMALL GROUP MINISTRY INSTITUTE 2011

August 30 to September 2, 2011, UU Camp de Benneville Pines, California

In addition to the broad scope of starting, energizing and restarting SGM/Covenant Group programs, the 2011 Institute will include new material on multigenerational and intergenerational Small Group Ministry and creating sessions for specific situations, such as Later Life Issues and SGM for Veterans. We will also be field testing a series of teaching modules that can be made available for congregations and clusters or regions to hold locally. Plan on being part of this dynamic expansion of resources for Small Group Ministry!

Look for more information on the Network Website in December.

In addition to being printed exclusively on white paper, which makes it easier to copy and is a cost-savings for the Network, the newsletter is now printed on eco-friendly, recycled paper.

Small Group Ministry at the UU History and Heritage Convocation

Reverend Helen Zidowecki, President, UU Small Group Ministry Network

“Capturing an Historic Trend: Decade of Small Group Ministry/Covenant Groups” was the title of a recent workshop at the Unitarian Universalist History and Heritage Convocation in Waltham, MA. The workshop focused on 1) the importance of capturing history in the making, 2) technological and cultural changes that influence history and how it is captured, and 3) using Small Group Ministry to keep UU history and heritage alive. The Convocation included 75 people from the academic setting to congregations, from students to professors, ministers and laity. Most participants were familiar with Small Group Ministry, but not all had experienced a session. A session using history as a theme was part of the workshop.

The contributions over the years, from the earliest *Covenant Group News* in 1998, to ongoing articles in a variety of Network and other publications, make such a history possible. The diversity and breadth of input from individuals and over 150 congregations that have connected with the UU Small Group Ministry Network makes this one of the best documented movements in Unitarian Universalism. Electronic technology has been a boon to communications and to providing historic records. We need to keep capturing our thoughts and comments as Small Group Ministry continues to evolve.

The potential for using Small Group Ministry/Covenant Groups as a tool for connecting historical figures and issues with the present has only begun to be explored. There are some such session plans on the UU Women’s Heritage Society (UWHS) website (www.uuwhs.org), and this has been a topic of UWHS workshops at GA in the past. The intent is to present the positions and words from history and grapple with their meaning now and for us in the future. Let’s tap this resource as we apply the lessons of our Unitarian and Universalist past to Unitarian Universalism today.

A point of Small Group Ministry/Covenant Group history is the origin of the terms “ultimacy” and “intimacy”. To quote Rev. John Morgan in *CGN February 29, 2000*,

“I should have listened the day I heard Dr. James Luther Adams give a lecture at Andover Newton Theological School [1980]. Now, twenty years later, I know he was saying something I would need to discover myself in the midst of being a Unitarian Universalist Minister.

In response to a question about why people come to our religious communities at all, Dr. Adams was quite succinct. They come for *ultimacy and intimacy*. He went on to explain that they came to wrestle with (and from time to time actually find answers to) life’s ultimate questions. Who am I? In what or in whom do I trust? In what community do I belong? And they came for a sense of intimacy, a safe place in which they could be accepted while making connections with others.

Over the years, I have found Adams’ theory to meet the test of parish ministry. People come into our communities looking for a place to belong (intimacy) and a place to seek meaning (ultimacy) about living and dying and the spaces between. And though I hoped the churches I served could meet these two needs, I sometimes found how short we fell.”

Critical in the history of Small Group Ministry/Covenant Groups is the timing of three trends. The first is alarm over the lack of growth in Unitarian Universalist congregations that resulted in seriously looking at what people want in a congregation, as noted above. Second is *The Twelve Keys to an Effective Church* and other works by Kennon Callahan that stressed the relational aspects of church life over the functional elements. The third was the evolving trend toward shared ministry, as seen in the development of ministerial associates for various areas of church life (pastoral care and worship, for example) that changed the role of the minister and understanding of ministry. These trends converged in the late 1990’s to provide the opportunity for Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry/Covenant Groups to emerge and flourish.

The full text of the workshop session is expected to be on the Network website by January 2011.

It's true, membership has it's privileges!

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