

GETTING TO KNOW YOU!
SMALL GROUP MINISTRIES & COVENANT GROUPS!

Those of us gathering on Thursday evenings for UU Thursdays seem to have rediscovered one of the primary purposes of churches, to get to know each other in a safe community. Not that this is a new idea, of course, nor that we fail to get acquainted on Sundays, but somehow the relaxed atmosphere starting with a meal on Thursday evenings seems to facilitate people connecting with each other. This reality got me thinking about the ways that we connect with each other in congregations, one of the most important of which is in small group ministries.

Small group ministries may include the Choir, programs like UU Thursdays, study groups and classes, dream groups, social justice action groups, and groups especially aimed at helping people connect, such as Covenant Groups. All these opportunities give us a chance to go deeper in sharing with each other than we can do on Sunday mornings, and all these groups allow us to develop significant relationships with each other. I might also mention that some committee and board work, and especially ministerial search committees can also provide many opportunities for getting to know each other in a deeper way (not that I want you to form another search committee any time soon!). The time we spend with each other sharing ideas and especially our stories can be tremendously meaningful, helping us to know ourselves and others better and connecting us with the church and the movement as well.

The arguable success of mega-churches notwithstanding, most religions started with small gatherings of believers and continue to include small group components as places to become better acquainted with a few co-religionists. Christian house churches were the norm through the early years of development of Christianity and the value of small groups have regularly been re-discovered through the millennia.

Many names have been given to small group ministries. Methodists got their denominational name from critics of the methodical way that Christians following Anglican priests John and Charles Wesley met regularly in small circles to assess the state of their souls. Women's small group programs among Methodists are still often referred to as circles.

Among other religions, small groups are used for training members of all ages in the beliefs of the religion, and also for evangelistic efforts. Some small groups are intended for study programs such as Bible Studies and meditation groups to allow members to delve more deeply into their faith, practice and beliefs. There are also a great variety of affinity groups, such as parenting groups, grief groups, AA and other addiction groups, travel groups, and within UU congregations: Pagan Groups, Atheist Groups, Humanist Groups, Buddhist, Jewish, and Christian groups as well as groups defined by age or shared interest.

Just as our families and other accidents of origin define our early years, so in adulthood we are defined in part at least by the groups, clubs, and activities in which we participate. In this highly mobile society, such groups often replace family as primary friendship and support groups. As social beings, even the most self-sufficient and introverted of us need to connect with other people at least some of the time. Congregationally based small groups may often fill these needs.

UU Covenant Groups have been popular in many congregations over the last 15-20 years. They require a commitment of attendance and behavior described in a covenant made by each group of up to a dozen members. Covenant Groups generally meet monthly, start out each session with a chalice lighting followed by a serious check-in by each member lasting 5-10 minutes, then followed by a topical discussion of some area of interest chosen either by the group facilitator or the group generally. The groups end with a check-out and closing. Groups are expected to offer some kind of service to the church and to the community each year. Some congregations include affinity groups, age-related groups, or

other self-selected groups within their covenant group program, while many try to randomly mix people of different ages and circumstances for greater diversity. Participants are often surprised by how much they enjoy getting to know a range of people they might not have chosen to spend time with.

Covenant Groups, of course, are just one kind of small group ministry, but they have proven to be one quite effective way of helping people connect with others and go deeper in their beliefs and self-understanding. Covenant Groups are not therapy groups, but they certainly can provide support to those going through difficult times, friendship to those who are lonely, and a source of strength within their congregations.

We have been talking about re-starting Covenant Groups from my first conversations with the search committee, but due to a shortage of willing and available facilitators we have not yet started. One of my intents this morning, is to encourage us to move forward by taking some of the mystery out of this kind of leadership. Although the facilitator usually provides the meeting place, and makes sure that someone will have an opening reading and that there will be a topic, the groups usually share most of the other work. In one model, no food or drinks are provided, so as to limit distractions and minimize the responsibility of the facilitator, many groups have found that they like to share a snack or to even schedule extra meetings to eat together, but that is up to each group. The Covenant Group facilitators in a congregation meet together with the minister on a monthly or bi-monthly basis to discuss any problems or needs of the groups or individuals involved.

Well, that covers how Covenant Groups work, but I want to also address why Covenant Groups and other Small Group Ministries are important even in a small congregation. On Sunday mornings when we gather for church, people have specific responsibilities and things are done in a somewhat formalized matter. Some meetings are scheduled before and after church, with set agenda and topics and little time beyond a very

brief ‘how is everyone doing’ check-in for getting better acquainted. Even though we do share joys and concerns by lighting candles during our services, we don’t really talk about the things that are shared as milestones, and most of us tend to be forgetful in our old or young age!

Talking about some of those milestones could help bring us closer together as individuals, but we can’t do that very well with the whole congregation. If we share some of those pieces of our lives with other members of the choir, or people we have gotten to know by sharing in a Covenant Group, or even in a committee, we will more likely feel comfortable talking further and getting support from our friends in the congregation. People come to churches because they have some need: to provide education for young children, to develop friendships in a new community, to share honestly about what they believe, to connect with people after some kind of loss. Small groups often are better able to assist with most of those needs than the congregation as a whole.

Sometimes people have needs that go beyond what small groups can offer, and we are also working on getting a Caring Committee together to help meet some of those other more serious needs, but the friends in small groups can help to share many burdens as well as to celebrate the good milestones that come in people’s lives.

It also helps if the small groups are open to absorb and assimilate newcomers. The choir is always glad to accept new members as long as they can blend voices and mostly stay on key, and UU Thursdays are always glad to have newcomers, while covenant groups may specify one or two times a year when they welcome newcomers to avoid a revolving door mentality. Other groups may accept newcomers more or less frequently, but it really helps the church if there are several places where newcomers can connect.

Some of my most treasured memories around church are from my youth group growing up and from retreat and camp experiences both as a youth and as an adult. I hope that we will be able to restart our youth

program soon, but that will depend mostly on having enough youth who want to get together. There are also men's and women's groups and camps and retreats for adults, families, and even choirs that can provide wonderful experiences and tremendous memories for anyone that attends. Such groups can also be really important small group ministries.

One of the great benefits of being Unitarian Universalists is that there aren't a lot of limits on what we can or should do. We have only the positive limits of our seven principles to restrain us, but otherwise we can form just about any kind of group, class, or study that anyone wants to start. Think about what kind of group you might like to join—there are probably others here who would also be interested! We already have a book club that has been popular for several years, but we could have a painters club or a photography club or a car club or a model train club or a train-watchers club! We certainly could host yoga or tai chi or meditation or gardening as a meditative practice, allowing those interested to get together to share their practice and their beliefs. There really is a world full of opportunities, many of which would support individuals, build friendships, and positively impact the church.

One of the great challenges for churches in this period of time is figuring how to maintain strength and enthusiasm with changing societal norms and values. Most religious communities are losing members. Even the ones which were growing by offering a sense of certainty with unchanging truths have been losing out to the unchurched in recent years. The upheaval of wars and attempts to ignore changing scientific, political and economic realities and climactic changes have led to a loss of credibility for many religions.

We Unitarian Universalists have always been part of a religion of change, always ready to adapt to new realities, if perhaps more slowly than some might wish. As a small congregation in a relatively small movement, we are faced with more pressing concerns about how we shall deal with the near future. We want to attract newcomers, but we lack parking and are short on volunteers with the energy to create new

programs, new groups. We need to look carefully for those things that will use our volunteers and our energy effectively and which will be inviting for newcomers. We don't want to say no to creative new ideas but we need to be cautious that we don't overextend ourselves. Many of us have health limitations that we didn't have when we were younger. Some of us no longer drive or no longer drive at night. Some of us have limited stamina and run out of energy quickly. Even so, there are many things we could do that we aren't currently doing. There are many groups, such as Covenant Groups that we could offer with limited effort.

Finally, there is the matter of meaning. We talk regularly about respecting the worth and dignity of individuals, accepting diverse beliefs, justice and equity, and about encouraging people to discover their own truth, their own center of meaning. What we don't do so well is give people places to carry on that search for meaning. Small groups, where people come to know and trust each other, offer that space for searching out truth and beauty. It is when we can enter genuine dialogue with other seekers that we can most productively continue on our own spiritual and philosophical journeys. Covenant Groups and longer term Study Groups are particularly good in facilitating that process in ways that are respectful and accepting.

The challenge I put before you today is to help create places to build friendships, create community, get to know ourselves and each other, with freedom to explore and discover a sense of truth and meaning. My suggestion to you is to help to increase our small group ministries by trying Covenant Groups and thinking about other small groups that might be interesting to members and friends and newcomers to 1UUCS.

I will work with you and our Program Council to develop these programs, but they will require your involvement and shared leadership! May we find energy and commitment to build these groups!

Peace, Joy, Love and Hope! Amen!