

Beyond Getting Started – A CCV Summit
King's Chapel Parish House, Boston
June 27, 2003

From across the country, approximately 40 professional and lay leaders in small group ministry gathered to discuss some of the issues related to developing and sustaining covenant groups in their congregations, "Beyond Getting Started."

This gathering was sponsored by the Center for Community Values (CCV), a not-for-profit educational institute incorporated in the State of Illinois that serves as a resource center and networking facilitator for people engaged in covenant group work. See www.the-ccv.org for more information.

As a catalyst to conversation, presentations included:

- Introduction The Rev. Dr. Thandeka, CCV Co-President
Associate Professor of Theology and Culture, Meadville/Lombard
Theological School and Affiliated Minister at the Unitarian Universalist
Church in Rockford, IL
- Content Julia Rodriguez, CCV Director of Outreach
Chair, Small Group Ministry Council and SGM Content team, First
Unitarian Church of San Jose
- Leadership The Rev. Bob Hill, CCV Advisor
District Executive, Southwest Unitarian Universalist Conference, UUA
- Integration The Rev. Michael McGee, CCV Co-President
Lead Team Minister, Unitarian Universalist Church of Arlington, VA
- Growth The Rev. Calvin Dame, CCV Advisor
Minister, Unitarian Universalist Community Church, Augusta, ME

Major categories and some of the identified issues included:

Introduction

Small Group Ministry as spiritual practice

Content

How to develop high-quality content that is meaningful and varied
Content as the basis for all-church conversation

Leadership

Accountability of covenant group leaders
Minister's relationship to covenant groups

The relationship between religious education and covenant groups
How do covenant groups meet the needs of young adults?

Integration

How do we integrate covenant groups into the life of the church?
Service for group bonding and a purpose beyond

Growth

Covenant groups as a tool for growth
How to birth new groups

I. Introduction Thandeka

Small Group Ministry is a spiritual practice for Unitarian Universalists. It is a sacramental act because it engenders and sustains feelings of acceptance, trust, well-being and motivates service to others. Small Group Ministry is a spiritual journey for us. We have come together to deepen this spiritual work through thoughtful reflections and shared insights. Our work is to heal our selves, each other, and the world.

II. Content Julia Rodriguez

Challenges of providing content for Small Group Ministry:

- To make it meaningful, varied, and of consistent quality
- To enable ministry
- To provide structure for relationship building for all kinds of people
- To develop a common foundation of story

San José content development process and philosophy:

Content of the sessions sets the tone for the whole program. The kind of care you give to content will be reflected in everything. Good content motivates people to show up. Content is the vehicle for the relationship building that happens within groups.

At San José a team of church members writes the content with consultations from our ministers. We have written more than 60 sessions and rituals. These sessions and rituals are divided into four types: general, seasonal, life rituals, and group milestone sessions. For each session we include three items: an order of worship, leader notes, and preparation.

Leader notes are sometimes simple and sometimes complex. They allow our group leaders to lead smoothly and gently. They describe any preparations needed, describe any unique activities included in a session, and sometimes provide context.

The preparation provides context, open-ended questions, and, sometimes, additional resources. Some members prepare carefully, and some not at all. They find their own comfort level.

By providing a formal order of worship we distinguish the gathering as worship, not a discussion group or a social gathering. The order of worship provides a fairly formal structure. This has the advantage of providing a place for some of our “special grace needed” members. They are able to contribute within the structure, where they might have problems in a looser context. We even go so far as to recommend the appropriate style of sharing for a particular session.

We write special sessions to mark the milestones of a group. These include starting the group, birthing, adding new members, member leaving, and a session to reflect on the group itself. We have four sessions that we use to build a group, providing a common base of story to bond the group together. The four sessions at the same time introduce the concepts of our Small Group Ministry. Each session increases the depth and risk of the topic. From experience we find that groups that tried to skip the four sessions are more fragile. Groups will return to the four sessions as a group-strengthener.

Team approach has advantages. Naturally varies the content. Team work produces more insights and innovations. The team provides continuity through ministerial transition. Ministerial involvement is essential for topics about our religion, death, life event rituals, and other difficult or complex subjects.

Plans for sixty sessions developed for San José are available on-line at the web site: http://www.sanjoseeu.org/sgm_content . More information about Small Group Ministry at San José is at <http://pages.ivillage.com/quixoposto/sanjosesmallgroupministry>

Conversation

Art Silver, Shelter Rock: The group responds to activity more than to talking. For example, the group members brought meaningful objects, constructed an altar with candles, and each told about the object and its meaning.

Laura Schlatter, Unity, St. Paul: Program is one year old, with 200 participants. Leadership team of 10 people supports facilitators and does training. Curriculum has been prepared through the first year, with the goal that participants progress to more challenging, deep theological questions. The problem was that not

everybody wanted to use them. Some groups use questions regularly, some pick and choose. Let Covenant Groups be flexible.

Julia Rodriguez: In San Jose, groups want to stay in synch. This helps foster all-church conversation. Sharing is not confidential unless confidentiality is requested.

Thomas Mikelson, minister, Cambridge, MA: Covenant group program started three years ago. Stories we had heard at GA were more glowing than we experienced. We started a “small group ministry” program ten years ago—now we are putting the covenant group program into an already busy schedule. We needed a program of Covenant Groups to fit into existing program. We have four Covenant Groups with 30 people, and many other types of small groups. Our questions are where to aim for the future; what role should Covenant Groups have in relation to other groups; how does small group ministry council relate to program council?

Julia Rodriguez: Small group ministry council (which includes ministers) is set up solely to support small group ministries.

Laura Schlatter: Many other types of small groups are already in existence, for example a women’s group. They were given the option to turn into Covenant Groups or remain as is.

III. Leadership

Bob Hill

The secret of leadership training is to choose the right leaders in the first place. Michael McGee looks to covenant group leaders for leadership in the church. We are training “deacons”—lay leaders with special powers—how do we make sure there is responsibility and accountability. Ethical issues: safe and healthy interaction.

What about churches that have ministers who are not enthusiastic about covenant group ministry? Give them a book and information; don’t start unless minister is willing. In the search process, ask interim if interested and willing to work with small group ministries.

After Gail Forsyth-Vail’s presentation [at GA workshop] one MRE expressed concern that small group ministries would undercut existing program.

Conversation

Henry Tichnor, summer minister, Fairfax VA: Key words are “shared ministry.” Reluctant ministers need to be reassured that this is not something else put on their plates, and that this is not in place of something else. Is it

possible to do on a grassroots basis? It is another layer of ministry in the congregation?

Bob Hill: Often when a group is in trouble, a minister is not enthusiastic.

Gail Forsyth-Vail: Religious education is about faith development. Covenant Groups serve an entirely different purpose, not replacing anything else (not Sunday services or New UU classes); not competing with other programs. Covenant Groups serve different needs and different populations.

Tera Little, Pacific Southwest District Program Consultant: Different generations have different needs for leadership and programming.

Calvin Dame, minister, Augusta, ME: We have 14 groups. One group of people in their 70s meets during the day. Family groups have kids wandering in and out; it's good for kids to see us discussing important things. Groups rise from different parts of the congregation.

Laura Schlatter: Our young adults are not involved in Covenant Groups. Groups are set up to be multigenerational. We have tried to encourage participation. We have one group of high schoolers, with a couple of young adults. We have a few young families involved.

Gail Forsyth-Vail: Intergenerational groups are working, with a couple already going. One group is led by youth and has half youth and half adults. Youth Group is using Covenant Group format. Affinity groups have things in common. When "bridgers" met, their parents also met. Their common experience allowed instant depth.

Peter Bowden: Youth work better with emergent curriculum where they generate the ideas. Young adults can do outreach.

IV. Integration

Michael McGee

How do we keep Covenant Groups integrated with instead of isolated from the life of the church? How do we integrate the positive feeling generated by Covenant Groups into the life of the church?

At Arlington we have a yearlong theme for worship services and Covenant Groups. The theme is the basis for a sermon series once a month. Covenant Groups use sermons as a basis for discussion. Examples are "The Big Questions": why are we here; why do we suffer; "The Big Answers" explores responses from world religions. Religious education chapel services use the same themes. This way there are common topics for youngest to oldest.

We have as a requirement that each covenant group commit itself to organizing and taking part in service projects for the community or the church each year. This helps groups to bond and keeps them from being overly insulated by giving them a purpose beyond themselves. Many groups have chosen to do their projects in the church, which has helped them to feel a deeper attachment and to become more knowledgeable about church life.

I consider one of the primary purposes of small group ministry to be leadership training. I draw more and more for leadership in the church from our covenant group leaders who have been trained in facilitating a healthy process that values and affirms all participants. I am finding that group participants also make more productive church members who are more likely to be involved in other church programs, bringing with them the small group ministry philosophy. We have an annual potluck for all covenant group participants that helps everyone to be more aware that our small group ministry is a major part of congregational life.

Conversation

Laura Schlatter: Service projects are good for the group and good for the congregation (for example putting together toiletry kits for women released from prison).

Renee Silver, Shelter Rock: Integration occurs during check-in when people make reference to sermon. Participation in projects has not been too successful. Most covenant group participants are very active in the congregation and are serving in many other ways.

Jill McAllister, minister, Kalamazoo, MI: Religious education teachers are forming Covenant Groups, meeting around curriculum in response to content, asking "what do I know that I can share?"

Gail Forsyth-Vail: What about working through congregational issues in Covenant Groups? For example, safe congregations or welcoming congregation.

Several: No politics allowed.

Laura Schlatter: We asked Covenant Groups if they were willing to use one session for a program collecting stories about the church. Many were willing to serve the church in that way and scheduled an extra session.

Calvin Dame: We used Covenant Groups once for mission writing process. The purpose of the groups is spiritual nurture, and we head off people asking Covenant Groups to do canvass. One of the functions of the small group ministry steering committee is to protect the groups.

Peter Bowden: Groups are for spiritual issues and spiritual reflection, not the politics of the church agenda.

Art Silver, Shelter Rock: Group members are looking for answers to questions. Don't use Covenant Groups for other purposes. Mutual sharing is meaningful. Don't bring in problems of the congregation at large.

Jennifer Nichols Payne, Southwest District Religious Education Consultant: Covenant Groups are a tool for growth, integrating people into the congregation. One way is to always leave an open seat. Is a group closed by bonding, or do we invite people in?

Henry Tichnor: As a project, one group sponsored a dinner for all Covenant Group members to celebrate the year. Every person took a minute to describe who they are. They compared their groups in different ways. This event fostered integration among the Covenant Groups.

Calvin Dame: You can trust that anything important in the life of the church is going to be processed. Don't use the groups for "organizational" purposes.

V. Growth Calvin Dame

According to the Alban Institute, there is a describable process of joining a church:

1. Step across the threshold.
2. Get kids into accessible religious education; attend worship service.
3. Within six weeks know people beyond coffee hour.
4. Have interaction with minister (minister looks them in the eye and sees them)
5. Decision: Is there consonance in this church between what is preached from the pulpit and what happens in the fellowship hall?

If we can move people into Covenant Groups, we can keep them.

Augusta membership had plateaued at 165 members. We kept two of ten visitors. Goal was to keep three of ten. The congregation committed itself to growth. The goal was to have more Unitarian Universalists in Augusta. There was a commitment to change paradigm to "We are a small group ministry church."

Groups are accessible. Sunday welcome by lay leaders includes invitation to Covenant Groups. Every newsletter has something about Covenant Groups. Half of church members belong to Covenant Groups. It is the job of the group to integrate new members.

Conversation

Angela Merkert, Congregational Services Director, Central Midwest District: How many congregations are moving with the principle of breaking off new groups? Many are not dividing. Does this stymie the process of growth?

Calvin Dame: Groups do not want to split.

Julia Rodriguez: San Jose groups split. Two have split so far.

Calvin Dame: If we have five people and a facilitator we start a group. A group grows up to nine. If a church is committed to growth, it takes a different way of thinking about the church.

Renee Silver, Shelter Rock: One of a group's covenants is to divide. We divided up a group of 16. They divided themselves, and half went with each leader.

Doug Kraft, Sacramento: With 10 or 11 groups, the facilitator group divided and two other groups divided. Dividing is part of the covenant: this is part of the program.

Michael McGee: We hold New UU sessions three times per year, and try to start a new Covenant Group from each New UU group.

Doug Kraft: Facilitators are chosen and trained. The first group was trained for six months; after that only those who have been in groups can be facilitators.

Michael McGee: We hold a half-day training in the fall. Co-facilitators start new groups.

Tera Little: In coffee hour people don't talk to each other. What about intentional hospitality training?

Calvin Dame: If you want to belong to a friendly church you have to be friendly. This is an ongoing role.

Jennifer Brower, Shelter Rock: Splitting can be talked about in positive ways: "growing," "birthing." Growth is in numbers and in depth of connection and commitment.

Peter Bowden: We're asking people to let us cut their community in half. At Willow Creek they seduce people into two groups. The facilitator chooses an apprentice; the facilitator and apprentice each take five people to take care of and shepherd like a "cruise director." Group starts to cluster into two groups. In Providence three young adult groups grew out of one.

VI. Vision

Michael McGee

Our vision for the Center for Community Values is that we will support and spread the powerful and empowering structure of small group ministry. We will accomplish this mission so that individuals will embrace a renewed spirit of community; awaken to a deeper spiritual life; and be moved to a genuine compassion to serve others.

Second, we will help churches to build successful small group ministry so that congregations will become: more caring communities of people who minister to each other and build healthy congregations; spiritual communities of people who seek to move into deeper dimensions of being; compassionate communities, seeking to heal and give hope to the world.

Third, we will help build a vast, planetary network of small group ministry so that the world will be transformed by people who: experience the universal bond of community; are spiritually empowered to live out their highest values and deepest beliefs; work for systemic change to alleviate inequity and oppression.

This is our vision, this is our hope, and this is our expectation.