

Small Group Ministry In The New Millennium

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Two weeks ago, on October 28th, five of us from this congregation, Cheryl Ring, Stefanie Barley, Janet White and Bill Galbraith and I traveled to Beverly, Massachusetts to present a day long workshop for leaders from the Mass Bay District on the subject of Small Group Ministry.

The Mass Bay folks paid our way down there, fed us, put us up in a motel and donated a speaker's fee of four hundred dollars to this church in order to hear what we had to say about our Small Group Ministry Program, because people from away think we have something going here in Small Group Ministry that they would like to have in their congregations.

It is my opinion that the people in the Mass Bay District got good value for their money. Because not only did we give them a good day of speaking, workshops and conversation at meals and breaks, but the program that we call Small Group Ministry that we have put in place over the last two years has the potential to transform congregations and transform the lives of the people in those congregations.

That sounds like such a big claim that I actually hesitate even to make it. But it happens to be true, so there is no way to avoid making claims like this when you talk to people about it.

Jane Gilbert and I did a similar presentation in April to a Vermont/New Hampshire District group, and we were actually became embarrassed as we listed all of the benefits which we had seen accrue since the congregation took up Small Group Ministry.

- Our numbers are up, we have more people involved in the life of the church.
- Our membership is up, we have grown in real numbers for the first time since we consolidated the congregation nearly ten years ago.
- Our budget is up, we increased our pledge support to the church by 26% last year. And it really wasn't that hard to do because people are energized.
- People who had all but disappeared were practically flocking back to church, saying, "These is what I was looking for and didn't find before."
- People we barely know call up to ask to become a part of a group and a part of the church.
- Because of the random assignment of membership in the groups, friendships and connections grow up between people who thought themselves to be so different that they had barely spoken in the context of coffee hours or worship.
- The committees of the church actually work better because members no longer come to committee meetings hoping to meet their intimacy and spiritual needs. They go to group for that, and come to committee meetings to get the work done and go home.
- The culture of respectful listening and deep concern which is cultivated in small groups where what happens is that people listen to one another, seems to have seeped out into other areas of church life, and the wider community seems to work in better harmony,
- The popular catch words of church life these days, "empowering the laity," has taken on a real meaning through our small group ministry program, because from the very beginning this project has grown as a collaboration between me as the professional minister, and lay leaders who have helped to dream this into being. It is my preference to decline opportunities to speak about SGM without being accompanied by one or more lay folks who have helped to put this into place. If other churches seek to create a Small Group Ministry Program,, hey need to see, not just hear about, the collaboration which has made Small Group Ministry so strong.

- Furthermore, SGM has created safe havens and the opportunities for people to share their spiritual yearnings and concerns, and to explore the essential questions that lie at the heart of a religious life or a life of faith.
- And finally, in calling it Small Group Ministry, we have been forthright in both making a claim and issuing a challenge. The claim is that all people of faith, lay or ordained, are called to a ministry/ We are all called to care for one another and to use our gifts for a larger good. The challenge is to figure out how to do that, and to build caring and supportive relationships through these small groups of regular human beings.

That is not the complete list. SGM has done even more than that in the life of this congregation, but those are the main points, and I expect you can understand why Jane and I ended up apologizing as we laid this out in the workshop in Portsmouth. It sounded too good to believe. We didn't even believe, except that we were describing what we had seen, not what we thought should be happening.

Our workshop in Beverly two weeks ago had similar moments. A great challenge, because it is a challenge to try to describe what we are doing here with Small Group Ministry, and great fun, too, because there were people there from all over Massachusetts who think we have an incredible, creative, exciting congregation here in Augusta and wish their congregation had some of what we have. Some of them are thinking of moving to Maine so they can attend here.

For those of you who are new, or maybe haven't hear this before, let me review this history a little bit. We began our journey towards Small Group Ministry a little over two years ago, when Glenn Turner, the former District minister addressed our first annual All Church Retreat about an approach to church life which we knew then as the Metachurch model. It consisted, most simply, of creating groups of less than ten participants, within the church, coordinated by the minister, that would meet twice a month to share their lives, to discuss religious and spiritual topics and to be focuses for caring, connection and ministry.

For those of you who were not there at the time, let me just confess right now that I thought this was nuts. I thought this was loony. I thought it would go nowhere fast.

Glenn had been excited about the Metachurch for a year, the ministers had studied it, we were all talking about it. I thought it would never work because people were not coming out to meetings or Adult Ed classes or forums or such. I couldn't see how we could get anyone to commit to a group meeting every two or three weeks indefinitely.

I couldn't see it.

Which proves to be an accurate statement. I couldn't see it.

Glenn made this observation. "People come to our congregations," he said, "seeking intimacy and spiritual growth. We give them committee meetings and Sunday morning worship. Neither of those adequately meets those needs."

The people who attended Glenn's presentation at the All Church Retreat were captivated by this idea. An ad hoc committee formed up fast.

I was still skeptical. But I like to point out, occasionally, that leadership is sometimes knowing when to step in front of a moving parade, and I could see a parade shaping up.

So I embraced our ad hoc committee, and we set to work, meeting every two weeks, and learning whatever we could about the Metachurch ideas, studying books and viewing videos, wading through the theology, because the Metachurch grows out of contemporary evangelical Christianity. It is the program which they use to create congregations of five or eight or fifteen thousand people.

It is a simple premise, you may attend worship on Sunday morning with five thousand people (and I have attended a church outside of Chicago where this is so) but you belong to a small group which gathers for bible study, friendship, support and connection. So, while there may be four thousand people in church with you on Sunday, if you miss your group on Tuesday, someone will call

you up, someone who knows you and knows what your life is like, to see what is going on, to call you by name, because they know who you are.

Well, I don't know if we were dreaming about five thousand people. But I know we were more than willing to help the church grow. And I know that the promise of SGM which was most attractive to people was the possibility in this frenetic culture in which we live, to set aside time to really engage with some trusted friends around questions of real substance and depth, to explore what worship means, to reflect on our hopes, consider what forgiveness might demand, to share poems that have moved us, to consider the power of theological words such as sin or grace, to ruminate on deity or reflect on death, to talk of loneliness or healing, to share fears or moments of triumph, to examine what a life of faith might mean or to chart our spiritual trail.

And to take up these topics in the context of a group where trust is allowed to grow, where there is a chance to really come to know some others in a caring and supportive group.

This is the vision that came to be our hope. And to get there the Ad hoc planning group not only read and discussed and watched training videos and ate pizza, we also went looking for models of small groups within the context of the liberal church. We came to understand what we wanted; but the programs we found in some other churches didn't seem quite right to us.

One program in a UU congregation in Tulsa, Oklahoma has helped that thousand member congregation grow by hundreds of members, but it was too structured and concentrated on newcomers. Another successful program in Brewster, Massachusetts has built a thriving congregation, but seemed scattered and not as focused on spiritual growth as we hoped to be.

In many ways, in six months that the Ad Hoc Committee met, we took a piece from here and a piece from there and a component from somewhere else, and we fashioned out of those parts hand out of our vision our Small Group Ministry.

We did two other things during that six-month planning stage. First, we kept the congregation informed and tantalized through the newsletter and discussion and the occasional sermon. And second, we introduced a formal process in relation to the Board of the church, we put Small Group Ministry forward as a proposal to be formally embraced by the governing body of the congregation.

That process was made easier, of course, by the fact that the Board and the Ad Hoc Committee overlapped by about a half dozen people.

But the inclination was a sound one, because the Ad Hoc Committee began to see that we were proposing a new paradigm of what our church should be. Small Group Ministry is not an adult education course. It is not another kind of worship experience. It is not a committee structure. In its most radical reality, it is a theological statement: that everyone is called to ministry, that the work of the church is the work of ministry for everyone, not just the professional. And ministry is connection, comfort, caring, spiritual exploration and service. All of those.

One important aspect, of SGM though, is the connection between the groups and the minister. Each group has a facilitator, and the facilitators meet together with the minister of consultation, guidance, support and encouragement. I am the coach, consultant and cheerleader for the facilitators. Through SGM, the ministry of the church is not limited to how many people one person (namely me) can see in a week. Rather, my training, experience and education is put to work empowering many others to carry forward the ministry of the congregation.

Well, I can see that clearly now, but I was still a bit of a doubter when we launched our first groups. In March of 1999 we had our first sign-up opportunity with speakers, dessert and a chance to enroll. Forty-five people came and forty signed up.

We created five groups. I thought that would hold us for awhile, but before summer we had two more, and by Christmas we were up to ten or eleven, with nearly a hundred people in groups.. There is always a group in the process of forming, right now I two in various stages of creation and two more interesting ideas in response to particular ideas which look promising: we have some friends in Farmington, for instance, which is a long drive. Maybe a Small Group there would help to

meet the need for a liberal religious resource in that area, and yet through a facilitator maintain a connection with this thriving community. And someone spoke to me last week about a group for those whose lives include experiences in twelfth step groups, AA, Alanon, Alateen, OA, NA, GA, any twelfth step work, a group that would follow our format, but whose members would be connected by a shared vocabulary and similar experiences.

Two exciting ideas, not only because they could help this congregation to respond to real needs and better serve people, but also because they demonstrate the flexibility of Small Group Ministry.

We learned the basics of this approach from the books of an evangelical ministry named Carl George. And his most helpful words these: after laying down a clear description of some part of the Metachurch Program, he would say, "We always do it this way, unless we do it some other way."

And I always took him to mean that you should not be hampered by particular forms, but keep your eyes on a higher calling, the calling to serve and to minister and to be the church.

Well, let me take a moment to talk about some of the struggles we have had. When we present SGM to others, we tend to sound pretty bright and chipper, maybe a little too chipper, if you know what I mean. But it has been a pretty amazing and positive experience, so it is hard not to share our enthusiasm. But it is true that there have been difficulties, though never anything overwhelming.

An ongoing danger concerns the whole church, not just the groups. And that is the danger of creating two churches, those in groups and those not in groups, those who might like to be in groups but who have responsibilities which keep them from that commitment, or those who just don't want to participate in this kind of gathering. We were aware that the enthusiasm and excitement which the groups generated could easily lead to too much talk in sermons or announcements or joys and sorrows or the newsletter and maybe the proliferation of a specialized vocabulary which made people feel left out.

At the same time, we wanted to keep SGM in front of people as a possibility, to let new people know about it, to let everyone know that it was an open program and welcoming. I think that balancing those two things, too much in talk and enough reminder and invitation has been a serious challenge, and I like to think we have done a good job of keeping a balance,

As to the other difficulties, I don't want to rehearse them all, but just let you know what I think we have learned from various trouble spots:

- that leaving groups takes adequate notice, thought and care.
- that having all the groups work from the common Session book keeps the connections among the groups and to the church strong and healthy
- that groups need an influx of new energy, new people, from time to time
- that people should be reminded from time to time of the vision and goals SGM, its connections and expectations
- that there is enormous health in every collection of eight or ten people in our congregation, and that when things get a little rocky, people will likely step forward and get things back on track

Now, what we have also learned is that the continued health and growth of our groups and the church requires the nurture of new leadership, both as present facilitators want to step back for while, and to help in the creation of new groups.

My biggest regret this fall is that I have not been able to bring new facilitators along fast enough, for various reasons. Our rhetoric has been that we would have a place ready for anyone who wants a group, we have had people on a list for too long. I am really sorry, because I want us to be responsive to people, and because I have a vision of SGM as a well oiled machine meeting all of these needs all of the time.

Particularly if we are going to go up to Boston to tell them how great our program is, we need to make sure that it is actually working

Now, a couple of weeks ago, I heard Denny David, the UUA Moderator, quoting Forester Church, one of our ministers serving in NYC. Now, Forester is a colleague of some renown, he has written a number of books and is a gifted preacher. And his quote is to this effect, that membership in a Unitarian Universalist Congregation should include the following four elements: Worship, fellowship, learning and service.

That is the path of faith in a UU congregation, everyone should have opportunities for worship, for fellowship, for learning and for service.

Well, this simple formula matches our experience of Small Group Ministry at its best. SGM is conceived to be an addition to and support of the experience of corporate worship, it supports the life of the church, which is lived out in shared worship.

And what small groups provide is a venue for fellowship and learning, for intimacy and spiritual growth as we have been talking about it, which is a rich opportunity much deeper and more satisfying than previously.

And, one aspect of Small Group Ministry is the expectation that all groups will engage in some kind of service in the course of the year. Last week, for instance, the members of one group undertook all of the support work for the Sunday morning services, including serving, greeting, chalice lighting and music. Now, this expectation, though it is spelled out in the brochure, is a matter of spirited discussion in some groups.

Which is just fine, both intimacy and spiritual growth require serious engagement with essential and ancient questions on just such topics: what is the path of faith, what is the relationship of the individual to the group, what role does service serve in a life of faith, what is the meaning of this life we hold, and how do we learn to live lives of meaning and purpose.

And just in case you are wondering, if you are interested in being a part of SGM, we have a place for you.