

TRANSFORMING OUR CHURCHES WITH SMALL GROUP MINISTRY

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Revised - February 2000

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This paper contains a rationale and a plan to transform our churches from a “minister” centered existence to a “ministry” centered focus. It will explain how important small-groups can be in the lives of our churches. Whether churches are large or small, whether they have over 1,000 members, or are a newly forming fellowship, small-group ministries are vital to church survival and growth.

The early Christian Church had its origins with people gathering in small groups: meeting in people’s homes, breaking bread together, offering hope and mutual support. That aspect of communal caring was essential in spreading their faith. Today we still come together in churches to enrich and enhance our lives with others, and with our shared strength, to proclaim our “good news” as well. We begin with VISION and carry it into MISSION, the basic building blocks of any religion.

Let’s begin with why you or anyone joins a Unitarian Universalist society. It’s not because you want to be on the Building and Grounds Committee, keep the books, canvass, or teach a church school class. You join with others in what you hope is a common search for truth, love, and justice. When people are asked what they seek in a church these reasons are the most common: religious community, inspiration, intellectual stimulation, friends, shared values, support for their spiritual journey. They don’t expect conformity, in fact, they often welcome and expect diversity. But they do expect respect for their integrity, and are willing to grant it to others.

We begin with VISION, which is the collective expression of the hopes and yearnings of the people in our churches. That includes our reasons for committing ourselves to attend and support a congregation. We have a vision of love, of social and economic justice, of the goodness that can be brought out in people. What we believe is then distilled into a MISSION: a gathering statement that says what we are about as a religious community. Often our MISSION statements stop with our self-definition: we are Unitarian Universalists who come together in the pursuit of truth, who use reason as our guide, who believe in the worth and dignity of each individual, who provide a Religious Exploration for our children, and bring our Unitarian Universalist values to bear in all our community relations. Often, our MISSION statements simply define loosely our ideals but lack a direction. Why are we in the church business? What ought we to be doing?

Too often, our VISION and our MISSION are eclipsed by issues of institutional survival and what we offer is narrowed to the “minister” who preaches, and counsels, and does rites of passage, and who is our person in the community. Too often our MISSION, and this is perhaps a personal opinion, is limited to a cause (or causes). A church, I believe, is primarily about community - a fundamental orientation that humanizes the “edge” that too frequently characterizes our causes.

Let me offer a MISSION statement that fits into the context of the small-group ministry that I’m going to describe. It also implies an ambitious program to be carried out.

I believe that the mission of the Unitarian Universalist Church
is to address the social isolation and rootlessness
that is characteristic of modern life,
to minister to the hurts and hopes of those in our community,
to radically define our community beyond our membership borders,
seeking to bring other people who need our support
into our churches and into our lives,
and to nurture deepening relationships between members
as they share their lives and their faith together.

That statement could also be true of other faiths. What we hold in common with other faiths is important to recognize, and the ways in which we are different give us the added impulse for advocating our unique approach. What the above statement of MISSION points to is our twin responsibility to look out after those who are formally members of our societies and to those around us who could benefit from and spread our “saving” message. In focusing on “hurts and hopes” rather than “intellectual stimulation,” I would have us approach our MISSION more from a sense of “ministry” than from a philosophical quest. I would have us consciously attempt to mitigate our tendency toward like-minded elitism and to be open to breaking down race and class barriers within our churches.

The small-group ministry concept has been especially effective in growing fundamentalist and Pentecostal churches. It has been adopted and adapted by Baptist, Presbyterian, non-denominational, and Catholic churches. Several UU churches are building on that same basis: All Souls in Tulsa, OK, Brewster, MA, Augusta, ME, Emerson and First Church in Houston, to name a few. The generic name for the concept, and I’ll use it only once, is the Meta-Church. Meta means, simply, transforming. It gets confused with “Mega” which means big - and Unitarian Universalists have become so used to being small, that anything that hints at “Mega” is an anathema. This points up a problem. Small-group ministry, when done according to the book, deals with the issue of community so well that the group grows. So we have to deal with the “G” word.

GROWTH

Most Unitarian Universalist churches that I deal with think of prospective growth as attracting just enough members to pay the bills, get a minister, keep a minister, or add a little building or parking space. That translates into from 50 to 150 more members over 5 to 10 years. The fear is assimilation. How can we successfully integrate and know new people? The fear is loss of community. How can we know each other the way we do now if we get much larger? The result is a denomination which is decidedly, and persistently small-church in its membership. Two-thirds of the 1,000 + congregations that make up the UUA have less than 150 members, 83% are less than 250. The city of Springfield, Massachusetts has

about as many people in it (156,000) as the entire adult membership of the Unitarian Universalist Association in North America.

Is there a user-friendly definition of growth that won't spook us? Is there a process of actual growth that will allay our fears? I believe there is in the concept of the small-group ministry. But, first we should revisit the ways in which we generally operate our churches to see what might be added to make us more effective.

SMALL CHURCHES

Our smallest churches (0-150) put their energy into worship, Religious Exploration (which is a constant in any size church), women's alliances (esp. in New England), fund raising from fairs to cake sales, and a few selected programs such as "Cakes," "Building Your Own Theology," introductions to UUism. The programs may vary. But, there are usually not more than a few offered each year. Committees are small and are composed of 1-4 people. A lot of effort goes into maintenance and institutional survival. Community is built through coffee hour, choir, pot-lucks, and candles of joy and concern.

MID-SIZED CHURCHES

These churches (let's say from 150-500) are moving into the area of programming. There are specific programs for targeted groups. There are enough people in the congregation to begin to differentiate their varying needs. The minister is less available to individual members. As the church grows, it's harder to remember all the names and give the individual attention that is available in the small congregation. Committees are larger. But, with the addition of paid Religious Exploration directors, secretaries, choir directors, organists, and custodians, the scramble for dollars and institutional survival continues. There is a caring committee or a membership committee that tracks new people and members and provides some contact other than through the minister. The churches that do well are alive with various groups meeting throughout the week.

LARGE SIZE CHURCHES

Once over 500 and up to the 1,500 members which is currently our outside limit in church size, the issue of staffing becomes paramount with an incremental addition of professional ministers and/or a Director of Volunteers to organize the laity for the work of the church. It is now impossible for the minister to know all the people. The key happening is worship. But, the more successful large churches have a multitude of programs. The First Parish in Brewster, MA has roughly 800 members. It is organized along the lines of affinity groups. There are men's groups, women's groups, gay and lesbian groups, UU Christian groups, UU Buddhist groups, wise women groups - the list goes on. And, there is much involvement in the community supplementing the support which these groups provide and extending UU concern into the wider world. Growth is possible because the laity are tapped for initiative and leadership. The minister's role is to empower lay leadership. And that implies a certain letting go of power and influence that ministers tend to hold. Brewster is one of the groups that can serve as a model as to how to grow a church. Roughly 800 members in a town of 6,000!

QUESTION: WHY DO MOST OF OUR CHURCHES (TWO-THIRDS) STAY UNDER 150 MEMBERS, AND 83% UNDER 250?

From what I have observed (20 years as a UU parish minister, and 18 years as a UUA District Field Staff person), churches grow when most of the visitors and new folk are integrated into one of the groups in the congregation. If there are no or few groups, other than committees, the choir, and a few programs, it's hard to make friends. Roy Oswald, from the Alban Institute, says that you have to make 6 friends in the first 6 months or you won't stay in a church. Seven out of nine people who come in the front

door to worship end up leaving. The reverse is true with people who come into the church through small groups. There they meet and bond with others. There they are known and welcomed. There they are called by name.

THEY TEND TO STAY.

Look at any church, regardless of size, and where you see that only a small number of people in the entire congregation is part of a significant relational group, you know the congregation is treading water and new members are coming in the front and going out the back. Even in small churches, where, supposedly, everyone is family, there are only a few strong relational groups, and newcomers have a hard time cracking them. It's not out of meanness. The members of those groups simply have all the friends they can handle. The problem is that they don't, institutionally, work to create new groups for new people. The result is that over time the new people leave. Basically, even with the powerful message of hope that Unitarian Universalism has for the world, we are sitting on the franchise, disenfranchising the people who come to check us out. How else can you explain how we can so successfully manage to run in place over the last several decades?

New people in our churches resist growth because, in part, they have themselves not found a place in the church and fear that greater numbers will result in their being even more invisible. Older members resist growth because they feel the increased demand on their time. They fear the loss of "family," but, in reality, there are maybe only two or three families of 8-12 people in a hundred member church. Growth is a dirty word because it implies increased anonymity. It implies being a spectator instead of being a member of a community. You join to have your search and your integrity honored and shared and all there may be for you is a sermon, coffee hour, small-talk, and a job ushering.

IS GROWTH FOR GROWTH'S SAKE?

If so, that not what people want. The point is to value and take care of each other. If we do that well enough, the consequence is growth. We will then bring in people whom we have reached, one by one, because we want them and they want us. The more attractive we are to ourselves; the more attractive we will be to others. Our ministry to ourselves is what will attract others.

ARE PROGRAMS THE ANSWER?

In reading Kennon Callahan's book: Twelve Keys to an Effective Church, I was struck by Callahan's listing "programs" as being a functional rather than a relational characteristic of a church. I had thought that having adult Exploration or adult enrichment programs was what enhanced the community of the church. I've since had to do some hard thinking about that. The work of Carl George, who has done a great deal of writing on small-group ministries, emphasizes that:

- relational groups focus on our lives
- relational groups that exceed 10 people cease to be relational in their impact

The nature of many of our "programs" is oriented around learning about something. Programs like "Building Your Own Theology," or "Writing Your Spiritual Autobiography," tend to be more relational. When we talk about "full-service" congregations, we expect that they are going to have a lot of programs. We expect churches to grow into full-service congregations. Supposedly, that happens at 150 barrier. And, barrier it is. Why don't more of our congregations pass the line? I suspect that most of our people in small congregations cherish the ideal of the "family" church whether they get it or not. Passing 150 is losing it. If the church offers mostly programs (teaching classes) rather than relational groups, what was valued in the small church is lost. Hence the resistances. So, how might we develop a church differently, right from

the outset, or how might we restructure, in order to provide the relational quality of spiritual development which our people, like everyone else, are looking for?

GIVE PEOPLE WHAT THEY WANT

We say we want inspiration, a religious community, and spiritual growth. Roy Oswald talks about the cathedral, the cell, and the closet. We want life-affirming worship. We want to be part of an intimate circle of friends. We may want to nurture our own spiritual life. In your congregation, how many groups, of from 8-10 members resemble spiritual relationship groups? How many groups are there in which the individual members regularly share their experiences, reflect upon them, and explore their individual journeys together? This is the next area that Unitarian Universalism has to take seriously. And then, there is the nurturing of one's spiritual life, the "closet." That's barely taught to seminarians. One has to go outside the church, generally, to learn meditation, prayer, Tai Chi, Yoga, or journaling.

TAKE AN X-RAY OF YOUR CONGREGATION

I return to the question of whether your church has enough significant relational groups to meet the needs of your members. I assume that we can or should make it a normative expectation that most people would want to be in a group. It should simply be what the church does besides worship. And so, if your congregation has 200 members, there should be close to 20 groups or more (you should be inviting neighbors) that people are taking part in. If you have only 3 or 4 groups, you know why you aren't growing. The supposition here is that if someone is part of a small intimate group in the church, they will be far less likely to resist the growth of the congregation as new groups emerge. Go back to my suggested MISSION statement which was to minister to the hopes and hurts of the people in our community, and to radically define our community beyond our membership borders, and to seek to bring the people who need our support (and who will, in turn, give support to us) into our churches and into our lives.

FROM PROGRAM TO RELATIONSHIP

What "program" does is somewhat self-serving. It appeals to our identity as well-educated, curious, seekers after the truth. It is insidiously elitist. "Ministry" is not. Ministry taps the caring aspect of our nature. It puts our intellect in the service of humanity. The potential of small relational groups is to address our own hurts and hopes and those of the people around us. We are all part of the human race. We all have hurts and hopes. Catholics, Muslims, Pentacostals, and Methodists share this same concern. But, we each have our own theological twist. Ours is a radical respect for an individual's freedom of conscience. We do not expect conformity as the price of community. We have a greater tolerance for spiritual, ethical, and moral ambiguity than most people. Our lack of certainty about even our own answers to life's questions does not diminish our concern for others. I grew up a Universalist. When I came to the conclusion that there was literally no heaven for all the people we hoped would end up there, I realized it was up to us to help the people in this life whose lives would be hell without our intervention. This is not a theoretical debating point. It is ministry. The question is: how is a church best organized to deliver ministry? I believe it is through developing a small-group ministry.

GETTING STARTED

The key people who have to be invested in the success of small-group ministries are the professional staff, esp. the minister. We begin with the minister familiarizing him/herself with the material. Then, we introduce the idea to the Board and selected leaders in the congregation. As soon as you have a cadre of interested lay leaders who want to develop a small-group ministry program, then you expand the educational process. Let me use the Unitarian Universalist Community Church of Augusta, Maine, as an example (about 160 members).

As District Minister, I had met with the Northeast District Ministers for their monthly meetings 6 times to review the material and the videos by Carl George. I was asked to help lead an all-church retreat in September of 1998 for the Augusta church. I made a presentation to them which lasted about 2 hours. Twelve people indicated they would like to form a committee to study the ideas. They read books, watched and discussed the videos during that time. I was invited back (March 1999) to give a sermon outlining the ideas to the congregation. The following Wednesday, they held a dessert meeting for the congregation and six groups were formed (February 2000, there are 10). Facilitators and apprentices had been selected to work with each of the groups. The groups meet from 1 to 3 times a month. Congregational approval was not necessary to launch the plan. Ministerial support, however, was essential. The interplay between worship and small-group ministry is vital. At worship, the work of the small groups and their leaders is announced, affirmed, celebrated. Carl George says that in such a church the group leaders fish, everyone else cuts bait. In other words, the work of the whole congregation is geared to make the work of the small group successful.

So, getting started involves some way of introducing the material to the minister, the staff, the leadership, and the congregation. And, then you need to find the facilitators to work with the groups. I tend to use the word “facilitator” rather than “leader” to emphasize style of leadership. The “leader” quality has to do with the responsibility and accountability within the group and within the system.

Floyd Schwanz, in his book, Growing Small Groups, suggests the best way to begin small groups is to do it! A minister could simply start with 4 to 8 people and do a group, selecting those people whom he/she thought would make good facilitators. Work with them is not teaching theory, but modeling what you want to have happen. It’s really very simple! That’s the beauty of it. You open with a short reading, do some sharing, have a brief reading and a couple of questions to lead into the topic for discussion, select the next theme, and do a closing reading. (See the sample Session Plans toward the end.) That’s two hours for the meeting, 2 - 4 times a month. Meetings take place in homes. More on this later. But, that format is it in a nutshell!

DIGRESSION ON HURDLES

The first big hurdle in transitioning to a small-group ministry is the self-concept of the minister. Even UU ministers are primarily trained to be shepherds. We start off in small churches. We are used to over-functioning in establishing our identity as the primary preacher, care-giver, counselor, community spokesperson, etc. The rewards are, if we don’t burn out, being affirmed and loved. If we don’t let go of our power and need for affirmation, we will resist the church developing faster or larger than our capacity to control, maintain, or deliver care! If we do let go, if we develop lay ministry and let go of our power, then the church can strengthen and grow and we do not have to be omnipresent for good things to happen. The multiplying power of small-group ministry in contrast to shepherding is enormous.

The following shift (from ministerial resistance to ministerial changes) is adapted from Carl George:

MINISTERIAL RESISTANCE

- a minister was trained to be a shepherd not a rancher
- a minister is affirmed by being ever-present as a counselor
- a minister likes to be the center of attention
- a minister is driven by expectations
- a minister overestimates his/her own importance
- a minister is individualistic

MINISTERIAL CHANGES

- begins to look at the big picture
- begins to develop shared ministry
- puts focus on groups
- has a larger-picture focus
- creates roles for others
- develops managerial skills

What happens when we make a transition to a small-group ministry - the minister pulls back from being all things to all people; the minister puts more focus on worship (as the church grows, that, too, will be shared); and, the minister has more time to maintain a spiritual discipline. Initial resistance on the part of the minister, to developing the small-church ministry, is the fear of letting go of old patterns. But, even when the idea is compelling, the idea of ushering in such a major change, when one is already verging on burn-out, seems overwhelming. What we found out, in the Augusta church, was that with strong lay support, the transition went smoothly. There is some initial investment of time and energy which is replaced by a growing network of lay leaders doing ministry!

CONGREGATIONAL RESISTANCE

Generally, I have found that individuals to whom this idea is presented are excited about the possibilities. They feel it would give them what they came for. There are some, however, who see it as a different kind of church than they joined. It asks more of them, personally, and seems threatening. It's one thing to share ideas; another to share your life. One thing to debate another person's theories; another to respond to their soul. Then, there's the question of time. There is a persistent myth that people don't have time for church any more. There are too few people for too many jobs. I think this has to do more with the unrewarded nature of most church efforts. Institutional survival modes sap energy. When we're not getting what we came for (spiritual inspiration, community, religious growth), then what we do in the service of the church is tiring. Being fed spiritually and communally is energizing. When things are going well, people have time to participate without complaint. The very fact that the small-group ministry churches are growing dramatically says something about what it is tapping into in terms of people's time and energy.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE SMALL GROUP MINISTRY

We begin with small groups, or "covenant" groups. The optimal number in a group is said to be 10. That also includes the host/hostess at whose home the group is held. That reduces the responsibility of the facilitator. It includes a facilitator and an apprentice. It includes several other people and an empty chair. The empty chair symbolizes the group's invitation to the next person to join. It may be wise to start with fewer than the optimum number and in the first month or two add more. The group then experiences/learns growing and assimilating. This will be important after several months when more people are invited in and some of the members give birth to a new group.

Why ten? It's simply the maximum number which experience has shown can sustain the intimacy needed to meet people's needs. Go beyond that and there is less participation and more burnout on the part of the leaders. I've had varied feedback saying that the dynamics are best with about 10 people; others prefer 6-8. The Augusta folks feel that 8 or fewer make it more intimate and manageable. I think the group and its facilitator should decide what number is best for them. But, if you do go beyond 10, you have a class rather than a relational group. It will not be as satisfying in terms of intimacy.

The group meeting is for a two hour period, with the time strictly observed. There are opening words, perhaps a meditation, and a sharing (an extended “joys and concerns”). Then the group reflects upon a very brief reading about some aspect of life for about another 45 minutes. There is a time to do a “likes and wishes” (which is what Augusta does), and then some closing words. The formula is not set in stone. The groups meet from one to four times a month. The more they meet, the richer the experience will become. More on this later.

The group leader is ideally a “facilitator,” not a “teacher.” He/she should have relationship skills: the ability to listen, to include everyone in the conversation, to handle awkward situations. The apprentice is not in charge of the group, but is working with the leader, and learning to be a group leader. The apprentice may be asked to do more in facilitating the group process as time goes by. She/he will also meet with the facilitator to reflect upon the group dynamics. The selection of apprentices is critical in the growth of small groups. They are your next tier of facilitators. They will either free up the facilitator to start another group, or they may go on to lead one themselves. That’s where the growth comes.

The host/hostess provides a space and arranges refreshments for each meeting.

The empty chair will be filled by a person recommended by the church staff, the leaders, or members of the group who want someone to join them. The key to growth, to ministry, is reaching out to include more people. You may have a friend or know of someone who could use the kind of support this offers. The potential here is enormous. Do the people in the group have to be UU? No. Should they be invited to worship? Yes. Should they be pressured, is membership a condition for being part of a group? No. What we are doing here is ministry. Yes, we want the church to grow. Membership, ownership of an institution and what it does, is what supports our ministry. But, we serve. That’s the nature of the institution. Can people who are not UUs lead the groups? No. They do not necessarily have to be members yet, but they should be UUs. This is a UU church which is doing this ministry. Leadership roles and responsibilities are best nourished within the identity structure of the UU faith. The growth of a group may occasion the birth of a new group once, maybe even twice a year. When that happens, the facilitator may take a few of the newer people and form another group, inviting more to join. Or, he/she may start fresh. The apprentice will become the old group’s facilitator and ask someone to work with them as his/her next apprentice.

Once a month, the group facilitators will meet with a coach (or, initially, with the minister). But, the rule of 10 applies here, as well. A coach will meet with no more than 10 facilitators. If you have 15 group facilitators, then there will be a coach for 8 and one for 7. What’s the reason for a coach? A coach (who as the program develops over the years) will be someone who rises from the ranks, does the apprentice role, the facilitator role, and develops some experience about groups. They will meet on a regularly monthly basis to talk with the group facilitators about what’s happening in the groups, what’s working well, what’s difficult. They will explore the various group dynamics and what might be done to enhance or alter them. They will occasionally attend a group meeting of each of the facilitators. They will engage the facilitators in reflecting on their work. In this setting, the facilitators will be learning from experience. But, what we learn from is not experience but reflecting on experience. The monthly group meetings are critical in the Exploration of the facilitators and even their coaches. In small churches with a minister, the minister (as is the case in Augusta) may assume the initial role as coach. The minister may even be the person who sets the topics, or gathers resources to be used at the request of the groups and their facilitators

As a church grows, it grows in 10s. There will always be someone to meet with, at most, 10 people. The facilitator will have his/her group of 10. The coach will have his/her group of 10. There will be another level of care, someone to meet with no more than 10 coaches. So, when the church is 5,000 to 10,000 strong, no one is dealing with more than 10 people all the way up and down the line.

ORGANIZING RESPONSIBLY

What's being developed is a system of Exploration and support so that we can do good work with each other, learn from each other's experience, and receive support, encouragement, and stimulation. The absolute bottom line of what has to go well is the small group. And, within that, the structure is quite free, egalitarian, and flexible. We are not looking for Lone Rangers as facilitators who know all there is to know about what they are doing. Rather, the working premise is that in small-group ministry we are always being challenged, supported, heard, and encouraged by one another. We are not only birthing new groups as we go, but new facilitators as well!

WHAT KIND OF COMMITMENT?

Basically, involvement in a group could be a lifelong process. The participants will change, the topics will change, and one's role in the group may change. I think, initially, members of a group should covenant to give it 6 months. Group facilitators tend to remain in that role for some time. Like any men's or women's group, regular attendance is critical.

WHAT'S THE NATURE OF THIS MINISTRY?

Consider the Joys and Concerns brought to our worship services. Thirty seconds, a few minutes, that's all the time for the sharing which, one hopes, is picked up on by a friend, or the minister for further elaboration. Or, perhaps once heard, it's forgotten. About an hour of the small-group meeting is taken up with sharing what is going on in one's life. It's not about what's going on in your spouse or partner's life, but about the individual. It's not therapy. It's about the stuff of our lives: births, relationships, work, death, our passions and concerns. When a person is sick, the group they are a part of becomes the ones who send cards, call, visit at the hospital, take food. This is the group of people who will hear us and reflect with us and share their wisdom. It means the minister does not have to be "the" person who is part of every one's life. The minister may be asked to check on someone, but would no longer be expected to be that close to everyone. The ministry is literally shared. That frees up the minister to train people to do that, to encourage others to join in the process, and to nourish their own inner life. That takes the minister out of the burn-out track. It truly allows both the minister and the congregation to grow.

Realize that the pattern evolved for small-group ministry is the pattern, eventually, for how the whole church functions! It affects worship as the ministry builds ministry teams utilizing people's talents in drama, speaking, music, aesthetics. It affects social action in mobilizing people to involve themselves in the community. The minister is not the sole representative of the church.

In the introduction to his book, The Devotional Heart, John Morgan wrote: "We...must learn to see ourselves as a community, a people - and not simply as individuals who happen to gather on Sunday." Morgan also condensed why we come to church to two reasons: "...to discover a place to belong (intimacy) and to find a place than can provide some meaning (ultimacy).

WHAT ABOUT WHEN PEOPLE ARE IN DIFFICULTY?

It is a rare person who is not feeling in difficulty at one time or another. But, clearly, we cannot provide therapy and we need to be up front about that. Very large churches have allocated resources to ECR (Extra Care Required) groups, also known as Extra Grace Required. That may include AA groups

and the like. If we don't have those resources, we need to refer people to therapy if that seems called for. There are times, however, when each of us needs to be accepted, warts and all. The very nature of the group helps us to minister to one another when we are having a hard time. These are "ministry" groups. We're not trying to separate out the wheat from the chaff, as if what remained was actually wheat. We don't just come with joys, but sorrows as well. The very creation of a group or a church in which everyone there supposedly has it all together, calls into question that togetherness. Good people can be the problem in the way they subtract themselves from interacting with real life. Their lives are no longer real. They are not doing ministry. What we have going for us is the collective wisdom of the group, its leadership, and the back-up system of coaches and ministers. Having said that the group does not do therapy, but it has to be said that the results of being in the group will be very therapeutic!

Choosing facilitators for the groups is critical. Ideally, they should have experience in running groups. At a minimum, there needs to be an orientation as to the basic skills in running groups: creating a safe environment, setting boundaries, establishing confidentiality, listening, learning how to give each person equal time. The monthly meetings of the group facilitators, with the minister or a coach skilled in group process is essential. This is where the learning is intensified. The experience of being in a group can be qualified, and, in fact, the group could disintegrate, if individuals (when they are feeling especially needy) absorb the focus of group activity. It's a hard line to decide when, for the sake of the group, someone needs to be advised to seek some other/additional avenue to deal with their issues. That needs to be done with great care and sensitivity. I think it will be important for Districts to give workshops on some of these skills.

THE WORK OF THE SMALL GROUP

Some people remember the "extended families" which arose in our churches and fellowships in the 60s and 70s. And, they know what they spoke to and why they failed. They spoke to our need for relationships and connection in a highly mobile society. But, while there were dinners, and outings, and social gatherings, the "extended families" did not structure any consistent opportunity to explore life in any depth. It was very friendly, very hit or miss, and, at best, left us with some close friendships.

Two things the small-group ministry addresses. First, it structures and nurtures caring relationships in a group of manageable size. Second, it provides an ongoing opportunity for us to explore life issues in a religious context. It's not a class. It's not systematic learning. But, a small group can circle the religious territory again and again, gravitating toward its own needs and concerns, using the material to evoke what's in them. In Pentecostal churches, what holds this kind of discussion together is scripture. Just a few lines from the Bible. The people are asked what it means to them in their lives. Take a line from Paul:

Though our outward humanity is in decay,
yet day by day we are inwardly renewed.

The question posed to the group members is: what does that mean in your life? What is it that renews you? Carl George says this is not the time to address (and, remember this is from a Pentecostal minister) the correct interpretation of scripture. The only thing that matters here is how we apply scripture, or great thoughts, to our lives - our own understanding of that. The way the group deals with that is dialogue, sharing, not argument or discussion as if the lines were to be debated or abstractly defined. We can use the Bible, or Buddhist scriptures for resources. We can use the poet David Whyte:

At the center of this life
there is a man I want to know again...

There's an open-ended quest in which the coin we toss in the fountain may pass a long way before we hear the splash. It invites us to depth. What in you do you want to know again? What has been lost that needs to be reclaimed? That's the kind of conversation we can have with others. Or, Alice Walker:

I am afraid of people
who cannot cry

What happens to us when our feelings are blocked or unexpressed? How can we safely get in touch with our feelings again? Or we can take tap Singing the Living Tradition and our own UU voice of William Ellery Channing:

The great end in religious instruction is not to stamp our minds upon the young, but to stir up their own.

Which is what our groups are about. "Not to burden the memory," but to quicken and strengthen the power of thought...to awaken the soul, to excite and cherish spiritual life."

WESLEY'S QUESTION

I read that in the early groups formed by John Wesley, back when the Methodists were flowering, there was one question that the groups dealt with. And, in some ways, this is the question that is behind all our questionings: "Are you in a state of Grace?" I know that sounds somewhat foreign to liberal religious ears. But, think about it. In the middle of all our strivings, our path onward and upward..., our doubts and struggling, there are moments when it seems like it comes together. It's not something you can force into being. It happens. It probably happens as a result of something. So, how do you prepare for a state of Grace? I find a parallel in Insight Meditation in the Buddhist tradition - sitting dealing with all the hindrances: doubt, aversion, desire, grasping, torpor. And suddenly, just awareness. In small groups we deal with the flotsam and jetsam of life, as well as its momentary epiphanies, Grace, as it were. There is a place we want to be that is a calm, focused center, and when we are asked if we are in a state of Grace, we have a touchstone with which to measure our lives, and a community in which we are not alone in seeking Salvation. And, by Salvation I mean what gives our lives wholeness, purpose, passion, zest! I truly believe that when we come together in small groups, the underlying question is whether we are in a state of Grace! It is not an academic question.

WHAT NEEDS DO THE SMALL GROUPS MEET?

One person wrote me saying that first and foremost it meets individual needs. A person doesn't necessarily enter the group to "grow" the church but to develop their own spirituality. Though, for some, we might start with their self-interest, what flows out of that is a strengthening of the church community. The members have more energy for church business when their needs are met. Here are some comments from the Augusta church about what participation in the small groups has meant to various people:

SMALL GROUP MINISTRY HAS

- reconnected me to the church community.
- helped me to be excited about Sunday and going to church.
- helps me build personal relationships.

- gone beyond the coffee hour. It's fun.
- built a connection the minister without his actually having to be present. He's reaching out to the Congregation.
- has helped us to know people we otherwise might not have.

DOES THIS APPROACH FIT WITH OUR PRINCIPLES AND PURPOSES?

As I see it, the very nature of this group process affirms the worth and dignity of each of its members. It's about justice, equity, and compassion in its approach outward to invite in the people who are not now guests at anyone's table. It's all about acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth. It is the setting for a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. The right of conscience is always underscored. It is democratic to the core. I will not suggest that it will usher in a world community with peace, liberty and justice for all. But, depending on what materials are discussed, it might, as it might also foster respect for the interdependent web of life. Moreover, the living tradition we draw from can be incorporated in our focus themes - a rich treasure trove from which to draw. The small-group ministry can lead to a fuller flowering of our Principles and Purposes.

HOW ARE ONGOING RESOURCES CREATED AND MADE AVAILABLE?

In the UU Community Church in Augusta, the Rev. Calvin Dame has been creating the weekly group meeting plans. Some ideas are his own inspiration, others come out of the groups. I wonder if this can't be done at the District level especially for small congregations without a minister, or even as examples for churches with ministers. In any case, doing it would build an excellent resource library. I can imagine a District website where churches could access material on a monthly basis and then distribute them to group leaders. A District could send out 4 or 5 outlines a month. Topics could be found in Beacon books like Cries of the Spirit and Claiming the Spirit Within, in books by Eugene Kennedy like The Joy of Being Human and The Pain of Being Human, in poetry anthologies, in our hymnals, from our meditation manuals, from the Evensong materials which the Rev. Barbara Hamilton-Holway has put together in Berkeley, CA. A lot of the resources and questions we have already used (BYOT, Writing Your Spiritual Autobiography, Owning Your Religious Past) could be recycled using this format. Developing material for the individual sessions needs to be broad based. I've identified five general areas of concern of UUs.

- Wisdom Circle: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Taoism, Humanism, Unitarian Universalism, New Age Spirituality
- Justice Circle: Anti-racism, tolerance, peace, gay/lesbian issues, classism
- Relational Circle: Family, partnership, marriage, children, friendship, listening, community
- Growing Circle: Birth, death, forgiveness, illness, creativity, personal growth, conflict, change
- Earth Circle: Environmental responsibility, nature, ecology, natural mysticism, awe, wonder, creation spirituality

In addition, this format is an ideal forum to deal with social, political, and other current events as they arise. The sessions do not always have to be reflective, they might point toward some action people might want to take. Group sessions might also focus discussion on the changing of the seasons, holidays, special events.

What is good about this format is the ongoing nature of the conversation of people who come to know, trust, and care for each other. It's not a one-shot course. It's what church is all about.

WHAT ABOUT CHILDREN?

The small group ministry is primarily for adults. However, questions are asked about what can be done with the children. The group might assign a facilitator to work with the children if the home is large enough to accommodate everyone. This could be done along the same lines as the group process. You could have a baby-sitter, games, a video - the group sharing the cost. You could have a full family outing a few times a year in which you got to know the children of the members as well. You could structure some group meetings to talk about something the kids would understand (your early ideas of God, your feelings as a kid about being in a minority, or seeing how a minority person was being treated). The sharing is certainly something the kids could participate in. For parents with young children where getting out at night is a problem, then you might opt for a day group for parents with young children.

Helen Zidowecki, NED RE Consultant, has written a short paper on "Small Group Ministry and its Relationship to Religious Exploration" which is included as Appendix E.

MARRIED COUPLES, PARTNERS?

Questions have come up about whether married people or partners should be part of the same group. If that is comfortable for them, why not? The only problem that might arise is if they use the venue of the small group to work out their own process - that's not what the group is about. So, if they are comfortable with being together, and realize this is not "marriage encounter," it's not a problem. Some couples have opted to do groups together; some would prefer to do it separately.

RECAPITULATION

BASICS FOR SMALL GROUP MINISTRY

Goals:

Strengthen the relationships of members in the congregation.

Provide a more thorough ministry to members and friends in the congregation.

Provide a significant opportunity for spiritual exploration.

Provide a significant opportunity for intimacy to meet the relational needs of members and friends.

Involve the laity in significant ministry.

Provide an opportunity for growth by reaching out to non-UUs.

Provide an opportunity for mission by meeting the needs of those unchurched or dissatisfied with their church.

Basics:

Develop groups of no more than 7 - 9 people.

Groups are to be open.

A group leader (facilitator) and assistant (apprentice) in each group.
Meet in church or homes 2-4 times monthly for no more than 2 hrs.
per session.
Follow a consistent format of Opening/Sharing/Topic/Likes and
Wishes/ & Closing.

Group leaders covenant to meet together with minister monthly for
ongoing leadership development, check-in, mutual support.
Group leaders must be members of the church.
In forming new groups, leader goes with newly forming group.

Expectations:

Increased energy and excitement in the congregation.
Diminished conflict. Positive change in internal group dynamics!
Shared Mission.
Greater spiritual/communal fulfillment of leaders and group
members.
Increased loyalty to church financially & in volunteer time.
Return of members who have left the church.
If membership attrition ceases...if members come back...if new
people are attracted and stay, then the church is going to
grow numerically.

Challenges:

Church membership will increase. More services may be necessary.
There may be pressure to fail due to the changes brought by growth.
Will the small group ministry be self-serving, or part of a planned
outreach to welcome more members and serve more people?

ORGANIZING FOR SMALL GROUP MINISTRY

Two ways to begin:

- A. - Self-selected lay leaders form a task force and, with the minister, study and then implement a Small Group Ministry program. (some in that task force may become group leaders, or coaches, though the task force would also work to recruit leaders.)

- B. - Turbo-Start. Minister/s pick facilitators (let's say 6) to lead the first small groups, training them by doing Small Group Ministry with them. Small Group leaders would be chosen on the basis of their facilitative skills not their teaching skills.

Focus-material for learning:

1. Read/discuss aspects of SGM paper by Glenn Turner
2. Read chapters of The Coming Church Revolution by Carl George
3. Watch the VISION videos of Carl George (5 of them) discuss
4. Do check-ins each meeting.
5. Do sample sessions now and again - critique
6. Read portions of Nine Keys to Effective Small Group Leadership by Carl George
7. Plan 3 months of meetings weekly or twice monthly for either approach - A or B

Covenant:

Covenant with the leaders to meet monthly with minister or coach.

Covenant with leaders to maintain open groups.

Covenant with leaders on MISSION!

Covenant with the group on issues of attendance, openness, confidentiality, MISSION!

Decide how what and how information will be shared from the groups with the professional staff.

HOW ONE CHURCH DOES IT

The Unitarian Universalist Community Church in Augusta, Maine has put together a booklet with an explanatory page on Small Group Ministry followed by the weekly session plans for purposes of discussion. We need to be careful about copyright laws in using and distributing materials. When you look at the Group Sessions which will follow, I've made some references as to where certain materials can be found which were used in the Augusta Church. Following is their explanatory page with some editing to make it more universally applicable:

Small Group Ministry

Unitarian Universalist Community Church, Augusta, Maine

April 14, 1999

The details as we know them

A group of UUCC members, including Calvin Dame (the minister), met regularly since last fall to decide whether Small Group Ministry was a good idea for our church. After unanimously deciding that it was, and that it could help fulfill people's need for deeper community and spiritual growth, we had the difficult task of filling in the details. What we came up with is listed below. We recognize that some or many of the details may change after we get some experience with Small Group Ministry. We see a need to be flexible with the details. That said, we ask people to give the following details a try. We have put much thought into them. There are reasons for all of them (which we'd be glad to explain)/ Undoubtedly, we have not thought of some important details, so please be patient with this new concept.

General details

- Groups of 7-10 people meet regularly (1-4 times per month) to deepen their relationships with each other and to grow spiritually. The more you can meet the better, however, we recognize that people have other commitments.
- These group meetings do not replace Sunday morning worship services. The two are intended to complement one another.
- Each group has a leader (facilitator) and assistant leader. Facilitator is a better term than leader since the intent of the groups is to promote active discussion and caring, not to arrive at a conclusion at the end of each meeting. It is important that all group members (not just the leaders) help with maintaining the group. The leaders meet regularly with Calvin (the minister) to discuss how the groups are doing, how they can be improved, etc.
- The groups generally meet in members' homes, recognizing that not every member can provide a place for 7-10 people to meet.
- The groups are intended to promote reflective adult conversation. Each group will be best able to decide how to care for children and babies during the meetings. A couple of ideas include having individual baby sitters, or having a group member take care of children in an adjoining room.
- While it is hoped that group members will be "on the front lines" of providing support to each other in times of need, the groups are not organized as therapy groups.
- Groups can be formed as affinity groups, in which the members of the group will have a characteristic in common (as opposed to an interest) such as Christianity, paganism, Buddhism, parents of teenagers, parents of young children with babies, gay and lesbians, people of non-European descent, etc.
- Groups can also be formed as diverse groups, in which members do not share any particular characteristic, other than being interested in meeting in a thoughtful UU environment.

- Couples can be in the same group or different groups.
- You do not have to be a church member or attendee to be a member of one of these small groups. In fact, inviting non-members to these groups is encouraged.
- A very important part of Small Group Ministry is that every group is always open to new members. This means that after groups reach 10-12 members, they need to birth a new group. The assistant leader becomes the leader of one of the two new groups. We realize that this will be hard after being involved intimately with other people's lives and ideas. We ask you to think of this as an opportunity to build relationships with new people (and to provide the opportunity for others to develop new relationships with you). Since new group members will have different spiritual experiences and ideas, this will also provide the opportunity for more spiritual growth.

What does an individual meeting look like?

1 - About 10 minutes of greetings and getting situated

2 - A chalice lighting and a short reading

3 - About 45 minutes of sharing what is going on in your life.

- To allow everyone an opportunity to speak, this starts with everyone speaking for up to 4 minutes, without interruption.

- This is then followed by 15-20 minutes of follow-up conversation.

4 - A spiritual topic will be introduced by the leader. The group then discusses this topic for about an hour. For the first several meetings, the topic will be given to the groups. Depending on how this goes, and what the groups would like to do, subjects will be given to the groups or the groups will pick their own.

5 - A quick list is made of what people liked about the meeting and what they wish it could have been (no discussion of ideas).

6 - Closing words.

Concluding Remarks

We invite you to join us with this exciting new concept. If you have questions about Small Group Ministry feel free to talk with the Minister and the ad hoc committee responsible to developing the concept (names included).

SAMPLE SMALL GROUP SESSIONS

What follows are some samples of small group sessions. Most of these have been developed by the Rev. Calvin Dame, often as requested, by the small groups in his congregation. To give proper credit, I've noted Calvin's sessions by indicating UUCA (UU Community Church, Augusta)

No. 1

Community

Leader _____

Date _____

SMALL GROUP MINISTRY

Group Session Plan

Opening Words:

Each of us brings a separate truth here,
We bring the truth of our own life, our own story.
We don't come as empty vessels...
But rather we come as full people -- people who have our own story
and our own truth. We seek to add to our truths and add to our
stories.
This room is rich with truth, rich with experience.
All manner of people are here:
 needy...joyful...frightened...anxious...bored...
We all bring our truth with us.
May we all recognize the truth and the story in everyone's life.
And may we hear and honor the truths that we all bring as
we gather together..
Together we have truths.
Together we have a story.
Together we are a community.

Penny Hackett-Evans

Check-in/Sharing

Topic:

A community is made up of people who enjoy and are ready to participate in mutual helpfulness. Not that they are busybodies always prying into one another's affairs. They are not conscious "do-gooders," but they know how to be helpful without making a big thing of it."

Harry Meserve

Questions: How do we want to be in community? How do we
want others to be? What do we experience as helpful?
What do you need to know about me; and what do I need
to know about you?

Likes and Wishes

Closing Words:

And now we take our leave.

Before we gather here again -

may each of us bring happiness into another's life;
may we each be surprised by the gifts that surround us;
may we each be enlivened by constant curiosity;
and may we remain together in spirit
'til the hour we meet again.

Barbara Cheatham

Number 2

Learning from Failure

Leader _____

Date _____

SMALL GROUP MINISTRY

Group Session Plan

Opening Words:

We gather to affirm the potential we all share:
for building community, for undertaking constructive change,
for engaging in mature growth,
for achieving greater humanity than we have known.
May our meeting together be a time of reflection on
possibilities untried.
May it help us on our perilous ways during the week ahead.

adapted from Harold Babcock

Check-in/Sharing

Topic: “Whether or not we soften the sense of “sinners” to what Eugene Kennedy calls “mistake makers”, the fact remains we are not and never can be perfect. This is not to say we are condemned to making the same mistakes over and over. If we learn from past mistakes, we shall have the joy and sorrow of making some entirely new ones and learning from them as well. That is learning. That is growth. That is what being alive is all about.” - Glenn Turner

Possible Questions: What have we learned from our mistakes or our failures? How do we make imperfection a wise teacher?

Likes and Wishes

Closing Words:

We receive fragments of holiness, glimpses of eternity, brief moments of insight. Let us gather them up for the precious gifts that they are, and, renewed by their grace, move boldly into the unknown.

Sara Campbell

Number 3

Timelines

UUCCA

Leader _____

Date _____

SMALL GROUP MINISTRY

Group Session Plan

Opening Words:

from the UU Hymnal, Singing the Living Tradition, use selection
646 by Wendell Berry

Check-in/Sharing

Topic/Activity: Create a religious time line. Divide a line into sections, one for each of your decades of life, plus the decades you expect to live. Draw pictures for each decade representing how you understood God or felt about religion during each of those periods, plus how you hope to experience your religious life in the decades to come (20 minutes). Then share. (Materials: appropriate paper & crayons or colored pencils)

Likes and Wishes

Closing Words:

“Take courage friends.
The way is often hard, the path is never clear,
and the stakes are high.
Take courage.
For deep down, there is another truth.
You are not alone.”

Wayne Arnason

Number 4

Worship

Leader _____

Date _____

UUCCA

SMALL GROUP MINISTRY

Group Session Plan

Opening Words:

“Ancient as the home is the temple. Ancient as the workbench is the altar.

Ancient as the soldier is the priest. Older than written language is spoken prayer; older than painting is the thought of a nameless one. Religion is first and last -- the universal language of the human heart. Differing words describe the outward appearance of things; diverse symbols represent that which stands beyond and within. Yet each person's hunger is the same, and heart communicates with heart. Ever the vision leads on with many gods or with one, with a holy land washed by ocean waters, or a holy land within the heart. In temperament we differ, yet we are dedicated to one august destiny; creeds divide us, but we share a common destiny. Because we are human, we shall ever build our altars; because each has a holy yearning, we offer everywhere our prayers and anthems. For an eternal verity abides beneath diversities; we are children of one great love, united in our one eternal family.” W. Waldemar W. Argow

Check-in/Sharing

Discussion: This session is on the experience of worship. These are questions you might use:

What kinds of worship can you think of? (newsprint might be helpful)

What is worship for?

Share an experience of memorable or moving worship.

What makes worship meaningful for you?

How do you prepare yourself for worship?

Likes & Wishes

Closing Words:

“Take courage friends.

The way is often hard, the path is never clear,
and the stakes are high.

Take courage.

For deep down, there is another truth.

You are not alone.”

Wayne B. Arnason

Number 5

Living Through Loss

Leader _____

Date _____

UUCCA

SMALL GROUP MINISTRY

Group Session Plan

Opening Words:

From the UU Hymnal, Singing the Living Tradition, use selection 614 by Black Elk

Check-in/Sharing

Discussion: Ask the members of your group to share an experience of loss that has been a significant part of their life journey. Introduce the sharing with this reading:

“I have journeyed to a place of great sorrow and there did I cry from the very depths of my soul. For days you thought I might never return, but I have come back to you: stronger, richer, with greater knowledge of myself. The crack in my heart will remain forever -- its purpose no longer to let grief out, but to let greater love in.” Myrriah Osbourne (from Life Tapestry, UUA Curriculum - used there by permission of the author from Mourning 1989 copyright)

Some questions to ask:

Was your journey a meandering route or a straight line?

Where were the dark places?

Where were you lonely?

Where did you have a companion?

How has it shaped you? Your faith?

What strength has it given you?

Likes and wishes

Closing words:

“Hold on to what is good, even if it is a handful of earth.

Hold on to what you believe even if it is a tree which stands by itself.

Hold on to what you must do even if it is a long way from here.

Hold on to my hand even when I have gone away from you.”

Nancy Wood

Number 6

Forgiveness

Leader _____

Date _____

SMALL GROUP MINISTRY

Group Session Plan

Opening Words:

If you knew how I felt inside, you would not act that way outside.

But most likely,

If I knew how you felt inside

I would not mind so much the way you act outside.

Why don't we try

turning ourselves

inside out!"

Edward T. Atkinson

Check-in/Sharing

Discussion:

"We cannot let the world's wounds destroy our spirits. We cannot let our hurts and betrayals destroy our capacity for growth and caring. That there will be judgment and, perhaps, justice, is necessary. That the violence be confronted and, if possible, contained is essential. But, most important is our capacity to nurture a loving heart, to affirm and not to curse, to forgive even when we cannot completely forget." - Glenn H. Turner

Some Questions to ask:

How do you respond when you are wounded?

How do you feel toward the person who has hurt you?

How long do you carry your anger and how does that re-resentment (feeling it again and again) continue to hurt you?

Can you forgive and break the cycle? Can you understand the other?

What does forgiveness mean to you?

Likes & Wishes

Closing Words:

“May the Love which overcomes
all differences
which heals all wounds,
which puts to flight all fears,
which reconciles all who are
separated,
be in us and among us
now and always.”

Frederick E. Gillis

Number 7

Living Simply

Leader _____

Date _____

UCCA

SMALL GROUP MINISTRY

Group Session Plan

Opening Words: “Why should we live in such a hurry and waste of life? We are determined to be starved before we are hungry. I wish to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life. I wish to learn what life has to teach, and not, when I come to die, discover that I have not lived. I do not wish to live what is not life, living is so dear, nor do I wish to practice resignation, unless it is quite necessary. I wish to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life. I want to cut a broad swath, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms. If it proves to be mean, then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or it is sublime, to know it by experience, and to be able to give a true account of it.

Henry David Thoreau

Check-in/Sharing

Topic/Activity (materials: pen and paper) Many of us would like to live more simply, to simplify our lives. But not many of us are likely to follow Thoreau’s example and build a cabin in the woods. Take ten minutes to answer these questions: What are the demands in my life that keep me too busy? What needs or forces in me keep me busy? What do I push aside? What would I be willing to give up? Take time to share. Ending question: What one thing are you willing to try in the next weeks (until the group meets again) that will move your life closer to your goals for a simpler and more meaningful life?

Likes & Wishes

Closing Words:

“May the light around us guide our footsteps, and hold us fast to the best and most righteous vision that we seek. May the darkness around us nurture our dreams, and give us rest so that we may give ourselves to the work of the world. Let us seek to remember the wholeness of our lives, the weaving of light and shadow in this great and astonishing dance in which we move.”

Kathleen McTigue

Number 8

What We Love

Leader _____

Date _____

UUCCA

SMALL GROUP MINISTRY

Group Session Plan

Opening Words:

From the UU Hymnal, Singing the Living Tradition, use selection
490, "Wild Geese" by Mary Oliver

Check-in/Sharing

Topic/Activity: Mary Oliver says, "You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves." What do you love? Tell a story of when you first encountered one of your loves. How does it feel: doing or being with the thing you love? How do you feel when you are apart from it or unable to do it? Are you at peace with the things that you love to do or be? What would you have to do to "let" yourself love what you love? How could we help each other achieve that?

Likes & Wishes

Closing Words "As we leave this community of the spirit, may we remember the difficult lesson that each day offers more things than we can do. May we do what needs to be done, postpone what does not, and be at peace with what we can be and do. Therefore, may we learn to separate that which matters most from that which matters least of all." Richard S. Gilbert

Number 9

The Sense of Gratitude

Leader _____

Date _____

SMALL GROUP MINISTRY

Group Session Plan

Opening Words:

“Who can make an accounting of gratitude?

For the universe we give thanks, an expanse of life to stretch
us with wonder...

For the earth we give thanks, fragment of the stars that is our home...

For life we give thanks, the burning of stars ordered and tempered here
allowing us life and breath...

For growth we give thanks, for the heritage of the spirit, for all the forces
past our knowing, power past our control...

For the ages which follow us, for the eternity of days, in which life is
ever renewed and fulfilled, we give thanks.”

adapted from Kenneth Patton,

Hymns for the Celebration of Life

Check-in/Sharing

Topic: There are things in life that just sort of hang there: like free floating guilt and angst. But, what about a sense of gratitude? Doesn't that well up at times and demand expression? A blessing, a song of praise, a shout, a loud HURRAH! I'm talking about a sense of gratitude that goes beyond just what another person does for you. I'm talking about the fiery sunset, the smell of the rose, the very existence of the artichoke and the giraffe. It should take our breath away. And our breath, oxygen - yes, thank you!

Questions we should answer:

How do you cultivate a thankful heart?

How do we stay aware of that in Life which is sheer blessing?

Likes and Wishes

Closing Words:

“God,
may our ears be open to little birds who are the secret of living,
may we take time to see flowers and people for the beauty they are,
may we make room in our lives for one another.”

Richard F. Boeke

Number 10

Preparing for Christmas

Leader _____

Date _____

SMALL GROUP MINISTRY

Group Session Plan

Opening Words:

From the UU Hymnal, Singing the Living Tradition, use selection 615,
“The Work of Christmas,” by Howard Thurman

Check-in/Sharing

Topic: (use following selection as a responsive reading)

The relatives have gone. The harvest season passed with Thanksgiving. Even as we bought our turkey, the Salvation Army bells jangled our nerves toward Christmas.

THE DECORATIONS OF CHRISTMAS ARE HUNG IN OUR TOWNS AND
CITIES. WE HAVE LEFT-OVER TURKEY SOUP AND (?) MORE SHOPPING
DAYS TILL CHRISTMAS.

This is the advent of peace and goodwill, songs to be sung, choirs to do their Messiahs. There will be Christmas Teas and office parties, Christmas Fairs, and hot rum toddies.

BY THIS WEEK WE SHOULD HAVE OUR CARDS IN THE MAIL,
GREETINGS TO A HUNDRED FRIENDS ALL OVER THE WORLD, EACH
WITH A LETTER TELLING ALL THAT WE DID FOR THE YEAR. LAST
WEEK OUR PACKAGES SHOULD HAVE BEEN MAILED. WHEN IS THERE
TIME TO GO SHOPPING?

Giving gifts takes more time than we have. Sitting in the endless traffic, hustling and bustling through the stores, lining up in the Post Office behind the man with six packages all going overseas, all to be insured, all to be registered.

SOON WE'LL BE EATING AND DRINKING MORE THAN WE SHOULD.

ANXIOUS, UNEASY, WE MAY MISS THE SPIRIT WE SEEK. WE PAUSE,
CENTER DOWN, AND REFLECT ON THE MEANING OF CHRISTMAS.

What shall we celebrate? A closeness with family and friends, a warmth in the chill of winter, a birth - what shall we celebrate?

THE YULE LOG, THE FEASTING, THE GIFTS - THE CARDS, THE TREES,
AND THE WREATHS ALL POINT TO OUR FEELINGS OF CLOSENESS,
DECLARE OUR NEED FOR A CARING COMMUNITY.

The winter is cold, the snow will lie on the ground, soon are the snowmen and skating, hot chocolate, skiing, and singing - all that this season is bringing.

THERE MUST BE SPACE FOR THE SINGING OF ANGELS, BRIGHT LIGHTS
OF BEAUTY AND MEANING. THERE MUST BE A PLACE UNDER THE
STARS TO CHART A COURSE THAT IS OURS TO OUR OWN
BETHLEHEMS.

- Glenn H. Turner

Some questions to ask:

What are you feeling as we move into another Christmas season?

What do you dread?

What do you look forward to?

What rituals keep you focused?

If your tradition is not Christian (i.e. being Jewish, Muslim....) how
do you experience this season?

Likes and Wishes

Closing Words:

“Give us a child’s heart, that we may be filled with wonder and delight.”

- Sara Moores Campbell

APPENDIX A

RESOURCES

I began my research into “small-group” ministry through some books, videos, and audio tapes of Carl George, director of the Charles E. Fuller Institute of Evangelism and Church Growth. He is a church consultant with an evangelical and Pentecostal background. The theological language, presumptions, and allusions are Christian and may put off UUs who are language sensitive. I think, however, when you realize what is behind saving souls for Christ, basically bringing people into community who are isolated and adrift, you may find you could have more in common with the orthodox than you realized. Persist. It will be rewarding. The essential materials are:

Prepare Your Church for the Future - Carl George \$16.49 (Cnd.), \$12.95 (U.S.)

The Coming Church Revolution - Carl George \$16.49 (Cnd.), \$12.95 (U.S.)

How to Break Growth Barriers - Carl George \$16.49 (Cnd.), \$12.95 (U.S.)

Nine Keys to Effective Small Group Leadership - Carl George \$17.95 (Cnd.), \$13.50 (U.S.)

Growing Small Groups - Floyd Schwanz \$16.50 (Cnd.), \$12.50 (U.S.)

Share the Vision (five 60 minute videos) - Carl George and Jim Dethmer
\$289.00 (Cnd.), \$215.95 (U.S.)

Nine Facets of the Effective Small-Group Leader Series (nine 25 minute
segments on video) - Carl George \$249 (Cnd.), \$185.95 (U.S.)

The “Meta-Church Workshop Self Study Kit” (audio tapes and workbook)
- Carl George \$139 (order through CDLM 1 909 396-6845)

THE ABOVE BOOKS, VIDEOS, AND TAPES

CAN BE ORDERED BY CALLING

1-800-804-0777

Two UU books come to mind which, though not specifically addressing this model, lead toward the small-group organization of churches.

The Devotional Heart: Pietism and the Renewal of American Unitarian Universalism -
John Morgan (Skinner House Books)

Transforming Liberal Congregations for the New Millennium - Roy Phillips \$12.95

item 4183 UUA Bookstore

The Rev. Robert Hill, UUA Field Staff in the Southwest District is maintaining a web site on this concept. He refers to small-group ministry as “Covenant Groups.” What is important is how this kind of ministry works, not what we call it. We’ll each want to call it something we are comfortable with, although as this spreads through the denomination we shall learn what is the most accepted nomenclature and should probably go with that. To receive the Covenant Group News, subscribe or unsubscribe at www.swuuc.org in the “Rev. Bob Hill” section. Problems? E-mail: bob@bobhill.com. There were 11 News articles as of 1/00. This is an excellent resource.

CAVEAT

If you read, watch, and listen to all the Carl George material, you will know a lot more than you need to know. It is very useful. It helps to be exposed to the range of possibilities inherent in the small-group ministry program. If I were to narrow the list, I’d suggest The Coming Church Revolution, the Nine Keys to Effective Small-Group Leadership, and the Vision videos by Carl George and Growing Small Groups by Floyd Schwanz. What you’re doing by absorbing as much as possible is developing a broad base from which you can develop your own program.

APPENDIX B

Some of the members of the Northeast District Extension Committee may be contacted for help with your beginning a Small Group Ministry congregation.

Cheryl Ring, Chair of the Committee and member and group leader, at the Augusta Church - (207) 621-0590 cring@mint.net

Charlie Scholz, President of the NED - 277 Woodstock Rd., Fredericton, NB E3B 2H8, (506) 455-6105 thiscbs@nbnet.nb.ca

Rev. Helen Zidowecki, NED Religious Exploration Consultant - RR 1, Box 8279, Litchfield, ME 04350 (207) 582-5308 HZMRE@mint.net

Rev. Calvin Dame - UUCC Augusta, 69 Winthrop St., Augusta, ME 04330, (207) 623-3663 caldame@aol.com

Rev. Nancy Anderson - (not on Ext. Committee but with workshop experience in the Small Group Ministry) (address: see Charlie Scholz)

Rev. Glenn H. Turner, District Minister NED-UUA - 227 Industrial Way, Portland, ME 04103 (207) 797-3246 gturner2@maine.rr.com

APPENDIX C

I want to thank Frances Buckmaster who introduced me to the work of Carl George and his ideas on the “Meta-church.” I want to thank the following people for their suggestions in shaping this paper: Cheryl Ring, Charlie Scholz, Helen Zidowecki, Georgia Prickett, Calvin Dame, and Rhonda Millett. I also want to thank Bob Hill for his collaboration in creating and spreading information on “Covenant” Groups and Small Group Ministry. And, thanks in the Northeast District to the Unitarian Universalist Community Church in Augusta who turned theory into fact, like spinning straw into gold as this idea has unfolded.

APPENDIX D

The quotation from Alice Walker came from Horses Make a Landscape Look More Beautiful - 1983 Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.

The quotation from David Whyte came from The House of Belonging - 1997 Many Rivers Press

Material on shepherds and ranchers from How to Break Growth Barriers by Carl George - 1993 Baker Books

Quotation from Harry C. Meserve came from About Community - 1998 Downeast Graphics & Printing, Ellsworth, ME

APPENDIX E

“Small Group Ministry And Its Connection To
Religious Exploration”

by the Rev. Helen Zidowecki, NED RE Consultant

What connects us in the church community? Is it relationships? Content? Methodology? What do you remember of your religious experience as a child?

Small Group Ministry is a focus for churches within the Northeast District. Religious Exploration, as part of the larger church community, can implement the focus on the connecting, relational components of the church community. The Sunday morning Religious Exploration sessions are not "pure" cell groups, as implemented within a congregation, but a number of the principles inherent in the Small Group Concept can be introduced into Religious Exploration. This is a beginning description of how this can occur intentionally. It is important that we consider this, as we are changing the culture of our congregations to caring communities.

Components: Three components of the concept are celebration, small groups, and individual spiritual growth. The celebration occurs in worship, the small group provides relational context, and both of these support and enhance spiritual growth. As we focus on the small group, keep the other components in mind. In reality, the small group provides the juncture between the celebration and the individual spiritual journey. Worship is not enough to keep people connected with a congregation; we must add the relational component, the sense of belonging to a community. However, a small group or relational component is limited without celebration and the energy of the larger community. Likewise, the small group is a setting in which individual spiritual growth can have an outlet. The small group in the Religious Exploration context is where tools for the spiritual journey are presented, with an educational rather than purely relational focus.

Small groups: We connect better with groups of 10 or less in which there is consistency and which meet regularly and frequently. This number includes leaders and participants. When the number of participants exceeds 10, a new group needs to be birthed in order to preserve the relational aspect.

Ministry: serving, caring about. Take time to care, initially as the group forms: in inviting and including newcomers to the group; in acknowledging those who are missing from a session. For example, in taking attendance, welcome, "attend to" those who are present, and acknowledge those who are "absent." If people are absent because of illness or difficulty, cards could be sent from the group. Knowing who is present and who is absent is primarily a matter of caring, and the record keeping for planning is secondary.

Implications for Religious Exploration:

- ◁Change in terminology sets the stage: from "class" to "group"; from "lesson" to "session"; from "teacher" to "leader" or "facilitator"; from "Sunday School" to "Religious Exploration."
- ◁Prepare for a session, keeping the individuals in your group in mind. Are there special considerations?
- ◁Each group defines its "Guidelines for Being Together," so that the expectations are clear, are formed with input from everyone, and are in the language of the group.
- ◁Be attentive to each other. This can be described as being present, sensing where you are (how you are feeling, etc.) and where the group is.
- ◁Leaders are facilitators, setting the stage for the session, providing resources and structure, but not responsible for the learning itself. Leaders also learn in the process!
- ◁Support is available for leaders. The leaders meet together on a regular basis, such as monthly, to discuss how things are going within the groups, how they are feeling about their role as leaders, and how they can support each other. These meetings are with a "coach," such as the DRE. The role of the coach is to support the leaders and to assist with the problem solving.

The small group sessions follow what Thomas Groome calls "shared praxis."

- ◁Start with where we are.
- ◁Look behind where we are. What does our knowledge of a topic mean? How do we know this?
- ◁In this group setting, what does it mean? For example, how is the topic seen in light of the Unitarian Universalist Affirmations and Traditions/Sources?
- ◁What can we learn, how can we experience the topic within our own church community? The sharing of the group is a critical part of this learning.
- ◁What does this mean as we leave the session? How can we apply our new learning to our spiritual and life journey? The outcome of the session is new personal understanding and tools to apply to life.

The implication of this model is critical in small group ministry: the group shapes the educational experience.

YOUTH

In addition to the concepts of Small Group Ministry within the Religious Exploration Program in a congregation, the Youth use the Five Steps to Building Community that have been published by the UUA Youth Office. These steps help in understanding the development of a group and the increasing levels of involvement. These steps can be used to understand the level of interaction that can occur within small groups. In the Northeast District, we are attempting to use the Small Group Ministry principles, combined with the Steps in our conferences, and are developing this as something that groups can develop within their own congregations. The balance is in Building Community, which relies on consistency within a group, while being welcoming.

Step One: Bonding:

Begin to identify as part of the team

- ◊ Break down cliques and barriers
- ◊ Establish a relationship of trust within the group
- ◊ Problem-solving tasks/activities that require members to work together
- ◊ Cooperation is the goal
- ◊ Each person's input is accepted and welcomed by others

Step Two: Opening Up:

Can realize personal imperfections and uniqueness, knowing that group loves them

- ◊ Showing genuine interest in others leads to trust
- ◊ The more sympathetically the group listens, the greater the trust.
- ◊ Activities allow sharing to the degree that people are comfortable.
- ◊ Participants feel enthusiastic about deepening friendships.

Step Three: Affirming

- ◊ Share appreciation of each other
- ◊ Participants leave with warm and fuzzy feeling

Step Four: Stretching:

Realize their importance to entire group

- ◊ Going beyond normal comfort level, actively caring for each other
- ◊ Sharing more of self, still being cared for, affirmed

Step Five: Deeper Sharing

- ◊ Share deeply, set goals and visions
 - ◊ Group sharing of problems
 - ◊ Help individuals work through problems, but still hold them accountable
- Not all sharing is appropriate for the group, especially if it makes others uncomfortable.