

A Small Group Ministry Resource Book

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The Unitarian Universalist Community Church

of Augusta, Maine

In April of 1999, our congregation launched a Small Group Ministry Program which has changed in significant ways the life of our congregation. More than half of our adult members are now in small groups. Many have been meeting for a year and a half, and most meet through the summer. Our Small Group Ministry brochure carries these comments from group members:

- "Small Group Ministry is the spiritual development group that I've been hoping to find for a long time"
- "SGM has re-connected me to the church community."
- "SGM has helped me to be excited about Sunday and going to church."
- "SGM helps me build personal relationships."
- SGM builds a connection to the minister without him having to be actually present - he's reaching out to the congregation;
- Through SGM, we can get to know people whom we otherwise may not have"
- "SGM goes beyond the coffee hour."
- "It's fun!"

Our Story

As I write, our membership has grown in real numbers for the first time in years, our most recent canvass came in with a twenty-six percent increase, and our RE Teaching Teams are over subscribed for the coming year at the third week of August.. There is considerable excitement throughout our movement now over the promise which covenant groups hold for revitalizing and growing our congregations and societies. I will include references to material that covers the ideas behind covenant groups in congregations. What I want to tell is what we have done, why we did it, what we've learned, and why we feel it has been successful.

The Unitarian Universalist Community Church, with a membership of 185 adults and a church school of over a hundred children, has roots in the Augusta community which date back 174 years. Our present congregation is a result of the consolidation of the All Souls Church (Unitarian) and the Winthrop Street Church (Universalist) in 1992. I have been a minister to this community for fourteen years, having been called to serve the All Souls congregation in 1986.

The Meta-Church ideas began to filter into the Northeast District in 1997. The ministers then in the District, along with the Rev. Glenn Turner, our District Minister, began to study the work of Carl George, a minister and church consultant working out of the evangelical movement whose experience and ideas on church growth are readily available in books and on videos and tapes. Glenn's ideas and work on covenant groups are set out in a paper called *Transforming Our Churches With Small Group Ministry*. (copies of Glenn's paper are available through the Northeast District Office or online at the UUCC Website: <http://home.gwi.net/~uuccaug/>)

While I was on Sabbatical at the beginning of 1998, Glenn Turner preached to the UUCC congregation and talked about the promise which a small group model of congregational life might hold for a church community such as ours. That fall, our congregation held its first All Church Retreat at a local YMCA Camp, and the leaders wanted to invite Glenn to come and expand on his ideas.

I was not enthusiastic. I was tired of trying to sell new approaches to church life to the congregation, and I was skeptical of the idea that people would commit to more meeting in their lives. It seemed to me that getting people out to Committee meetings and church functions was already like pulling teeth, so I could not imagine that anyone would make an open ended commitment to come out twice a month for anything.

It turns out I was wrong. I was wrong because I seriously underestimated the hunger in our hearts for real community and spiritual challenge and growth.

In the fall of 1998, Glenn Turner made a persuasive presentation at our All Church Retreat. Two things were particularly useful, one a question and the other an observation.

Resistance To Growth

His first question went right to the nub of a conundrum I feel we have wrestled with for years. On the one hand, if you asked people if they would like the church to grow, they would likely agree that it should grow. But when you really pressed them on it, they would admit that are comfortable in the church now, and if the congregation grew too big, they are afraid that they would lose the sense of community and connection which they value.

Glenn posed a question that moved around this fear. He asked, "How many people are there around Augusta who might share our view of religion, and who share the values and goals we have in addressing society's needs, and who might want to be a part of a spiritual community?"

Glenn dispersed the retreat participants into breakout groups with this question, and when they returned I was flabbergasted. I was used to hearing people say, "Growing ten percent might be good." Instead of the usually anemic percentages, people came back with numbers ranging from 700 to 2400.

And with the Meta-church Model, Glenn summed up, you can be a part of any size congregation, and still belong to a small group who know you by name and know your story.

Then, with these numbers in mind, Glenn made an observation which has become one of our guiding principles. *"People come to our congregations seeking intimacy and spiritual growth. And we give them committee meetings and Sunday morning worship. Neither of these adequately meets those needs."*

Ad Hoc Planning Committee

By the end of the retreat, an Ad Hoc Committee had formed to further explore the Meta Church ideas. The committee included some Board members and a healthy mix of long time members and newer faces.

This committee was active for the next six months, meeting at the church every two weeks. Someone would bring pizza, some brought their children, we'd start at 5:30 and be headed home at 7:00.

We set out to imagine how a small group program would work in our congregation, given our enthusiasms for the form and our dreams for our congregation. We wanted to understand the Meta-church model, we wanted to know how it really worked in a local church, and most of all, we wanted to uncover examples of Unitarian Universalist congregations which had successfully implemented these ideas.

We began with the Carl George Meta-Church material. We got his book *"Prepare Your Church For The Future"*, and assigned it as reading for a couple of members who

reported back to us. Then, together we viewed portions of some of the Carl George Training Videos that are available.

A word of caution is in order here. These videos were very helpful to us in putting together our program, but this process requires some spiritual maturity. Carl George is an evangelical Christian, and he has not been making videos for religious liberals. But the theology content is not heavy-handed, and by taking it in stride, you will discover the outlines of a covenant group program full of experience, and wisdom, and containing a vision which literally can transform a congregation.

The Carl George material is a gold mine, there is an abundance of good, not the least of which was his oft repeated observation that "With small groups, we always do it this way, unless we do it some other way!" We took this as our watchword, and while there are some aspects of Small Group Ministry which are really important, many details should fit the local circumstances.

Models

Additionally, we looked for models within our association. When we began in 1998, there were covenant group models in liberal religious congregations. One model came from the First Parish, in Brewster, Massachusetts which has successfully implemented a church growth program using a wide variety of affinity groups to connect people to each other and to the life of the congregation.

And the All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma has successfully implemented a program based on small groups which focuses on newcomers and is organized around a curriculum. I consulted with the ministers in Tulsa and we put lay people in touch with lay people; the folks in Tulsa were generous with their time and encouraging to us in our planning.

But all in all, we did not find a model that seemed just right for us, and so we gradually created a program that we felt would fit our needs.

A Name

One of the first important decisions we made was deciding on a name. Meta-church is a mouthful, and doesn't readily describe anything. And though the name Covenant Groups is distinctive and in common use, it did not quite suit us.

We settled on Small Group Ministry. This grew from a change which had been forming in our congregation for several years now. We had begun to perceive and more widely preach the idea that everyone is called to ministry, maintaining that the call to faith is a call to ministry, whether lay or ordained. I had trained and the congregation had invested a number of lay Ministerial Associates, who have been trained to help in the pastoral ministry of the church.

From the beginning, we envisioned our groups as a way that we could better care for one another. People would be connected at a deeper level than is possible Sunday during the Fellowship Hour, and there would be the opportunity to pursue some of the deeper spiritual questions which in our lives we so rarely take time for. But these groups would also form the framework in which we could reach out to one another in caring and support, where we could be present in each others lives in the forms that describe ministry.

Considering and discarding *Meta-church, Covenant and Small Groups*, we arrived at the name *Small Group Ministry*, and we stuck with it.

Congregational Involvement

During the time that the *Small Group Ministry Ad Hoc Planning* group met, we pursued two strategies in regards to the congregation. First, we kept our work in front of the community, through articles, *Minister's and President's Columns* in the newsletter and with references, announcements and sermons on Sunday mornings. Every newsletter reported or referred to our work.

Then, we shaped our work to the formal structure of the church. Even though the President and two members of the Board were a part of the *Ad Hoc Committee*, we reported regularly to the Board. We brought an initial and then a final proposal to the Board, asking that the *Small Group Ministry Program* be formally endorsed by the Board and reporting that action out to the congregation.

All of this resulted in continuous curiosity and conversation within the congregation and with the members of the *Ad Hoc Committee*, conversation of the kind that we all know is a powerful shaper of opinion and action in any group, but particularly the life of congregations.

We took this part of our planning effort seriously because we believed that we were exploring a program which offered a different paradigm of congregational life, and which held out the prospect of transforming our church. If it was to be successful, we would need to bring as many people as we could along with us.

The Facilitators Role

Small Group Ministry facilitators facilitate the life of the group. They make sure that the group starts and stops on time, or they delegate someone to make sure. They remind people of the next meeting, or delegate someone to do so. they contact group members who miss a meeting to let them know they are missed, or they ask someone to make that call. At the meetings, they read from the *Session plan* and, if necessary, guide the discussion, or they delegate that responsibility.

There was some apprehension around the role of the facilitators, and we were not sure just what it would entail until our groups had begun to meet. *Small Group Ministry* is neither therapy nor a course in religion. While the process is of sharing one's story and

concerns in an atmosphere of trust is clearly nurturing and healing, these are not therapy groups, and the facilitators do not need advanced degrees or training. Good commonsense, which is actually pretty common in our congregations, is the strongest qualification.

And while our Small Group Session Plans invite people into conversation on bedrock topics of religion and faith: such as worship, loneliness, loss, idealism, transcendence, sin, prayer, fear, healing, and others, the facilitator does not need to be an expert or an authority. The topics lend themselves to discussion and the sharing of life stories, and the discussion and sharing lends itself to learning. The facilitator guides with a gentle hand, and often does not even lead every meeting.

An additional and vital role of the facilitator is to maintain the connection of the group with the Small Group Ministry Program and the congregation. The facilitators meet with me as a group once a month. We consult on questions which arise from time to time. The facilitators encourage a sense of ministry within their group, keeping people informed of events or concerns, and encouraging expressions of caring. And, with appropriate permission, they alert me to situations where my presence or attention as minister might be needed.

Training Facilitators

The first six small group facilitators were all members of our Ad Hoc Planning Committee, and thus had taken part in the planning and envisioning which had taken place.

Their training started with a single evening. I put up newsprint and asked them what their fears were. We put those on the newsprint, and by the time we finished talking about them, none of them seemed overwhelming. We then discussed a covenant of mutual support and support for the vision of the Small Group Ministry Program.

I thought, and events bore me out, that we wouldn't really know what questions we needed to ask until we began meeting with groups.

Subsequently, leaders have come, for the most part, from within the groups, both identified assistant facilitators and others. I meet with prospective facilitators for two hours, go over the history of our program and the concepts of the covenant groups, share material and answer questions.

But the real training takes place after the new facilitators begin to meet with their groups. I arrange a follow-up conversation, but the most valuable instruction takes place during the monthly Facilitators meeting. I invite a check-in and take items for discussion. But the real work is in the sharing: stories tumble out, people relate exciting or discouraging moments, compare notes on particular Session Plans. The more experienced leaders share tips, and we reflect on what we have learned and what seems to work best.

The facilitators role does not require advanced degrees, this is not therapy. I say, and it may be true, that the most important responsibility is to start and to stop on time.

If that does not happen, people will not be comfortable in an open ended, long-term commitment.

Beyond that, the facilitator keeps people connected, remembers to bring the book with Session Plans, shares responsibilities, reminds people of our goals for ministry, and helps to make sure everyone gets a chance to speak.

And at every meeting I remind people that this is a ministry of the congregation, their ministry within the congregation, which has the potential to sustain and transform lives and the life of the church.

Apprentices

In the small group model we adopted, each group has both a facilitator, and a facilitator in training, sometimes called an apprentice. In our initial enthusiasm to get our program off the ground, we failed to apprehend the importance of apprentices in the small group process. Some groups had apprentices, some did not, some had them in name only. But the apprentices are particularly important in two ways. First, groups are made up of regular human beings, and people's situations change. Not only will the membership change due to the circumstances of peoples lives, but with groups that continue over months, circumstances in the lives of the leadership will change as well.. Our first difficult passage came when a group leader resigned and we did not have an apprentice in place. The transition was harder than it had to be, and we learned some good lessons: to have apprentices ready and to be thoughtful in making the transition.

The second reason the apprentices are important is that they are the key to the expansion of a small group program. New groups require leadership, and the people who understand the promise and the process of Small Group Ministry are the people in the groups. As new people become intrigued and ready to join a group, an apprentice graduates to be the facilitator for a new group, or stays with the existing group while the facilitator pulls a new group together.

And it might be that one or two of the existing group goes along with the facilitator or apprentice to the new group just to help form a core of ministry. But we wouldn't call it splitting a group.

Where Groups Meet

Taking our cue from the Meta-church material, our small group program was designed for groups to meet in people's homes. This has a number of advantages; groups can be geographically oriented for those distant from the church, it doesn't limit the growth in groups to the available space in the church, and in sharing their homes, people also share important information about their lives, deepening the intimacy which is one of the goals of small group ministry.

And, of course, there are people who cannot welcome a group into their homes for one reason or another. The groups work that out.

As it happens, some groups prefer to use one of the comfortable spaces at the church. Taking a cue from Carl George on this, this is an instance where we always do it one way, unless we do it another. It works for some groups, particularly in winter and for groups with geographically scattered members. My advice to facilitators has been to still meet in homes from time to time, particularly through the summer, so that folks will not forego this way of sharing their lives.

Sessions

The Ad Hoc Planning Committee at some point turned its attention to the content of group meetings. We were open at first to thematic gatherings, i.e. Buddhism, meditation, women's or men's groups, gay/lesbian groups. But in our initial enrollment there was very little interest.

So we created a Session format.. We wanted gatherings which would invite intimacy and allow for serious and engaging conversation on religious and spiritual topics. We were looking for a balance of the personal and the thought provoking. Instructions needed to be easy to use, require a minimum of preparation and, from my point of view, have a form which would become a ritual in itself without being unnecessarily limiting. The Session Plans are simple:

Opening Words: Gather people in, help to settle folks down, serve to remind participants of the special opportunity of the gathering, and often reflect the topic of the evening.

Check-in/Sharing: Each group develops its own customs as to length or responding immediately or waiting until everyone is finished. Groups expand this from time to time when circumstances call for it.

Discussion: A paragraph or two lays out a topic and presents questions which will elicit thoughtful participation and significant reflection. A group may stay with a topic for several weeks, or be done in an evening.

Likes and Wishes This is a positive format for feedback using a brief go around the room, e.g. *"I like how we approached the topic this evening, but I wish we had moved through the sharing a little more quickly"* Not every group does this at every meeting.

Closing Words: These bring the formal session to an end. Those who wish to can leave while others may stay to chat.

Each Facilitator receives a loose-leaf notebook with a couple dozen different Session Plans. All the groups work from the topics in the notebooks, although they can take them in whatever order they choose, and can linger several meetings on a particular topic if it pleases them. The Sessions are not a curriculum; they are questions on religious

and life issues presented in such a fashion as to elicit sharing, exploration, and growth. The Sessions are designed as a door or a path towards intimacy and spiritual growth.

I write the Session Plans, often on topics requested by groups or individuals. It is an appropriate use of my time and training as minister, so that the questions are asked in ways that encourage a deeper sharing. Sometimes individuals wish to write up a topic and in that case we collaborate to put them into a workable form and add them to the Sessions Book so that they are available to all the groups.

The question arises, why can't each group just decide on its own topics? We came to our system from experience. In groups which are sharing at the level of intimacy elicited through small groups, there is a natural tendency towards disconnection and separation; no other group could be as special as our group has become, people begin to say. While that level of trust and caring is admirable, this tendency leads away from, not towards, a sense of ministry and even real spiritual growth. It is a reason we include service as one of the components of our Small Group Ministry.

And when groups work on Session plans which they know others are tackling in other groups, the sense of connection is deepened and strengthened.

That said, here is a sample Session:

Small Group Ministry

Group Session Plan 21

Opening Words "Spirit of life and love, that lives in us and in all people, be present with us this day. Help us to be grateful for all that we have, grateful for this time of connection, grateful for these friends, and for all who enrich our lives. Spirit of life, be present with us as compassion, that we may open our hearts, listen with care, and be truly present with one another. Spirit of life, be present with us as a generosity of spirit, that we may meet the world with good will. Be present with us as vision, so that we may see beyond this moment and beyond the limits of our own day to day concerns, and remember, once again, that we are a part of a larger world, and all that lives therein. Amen"

Check-in/Sharing

Topic/Activity Human prayer is as old as the oldest evidence we have of human activity. Prayers come in many different forms: communal, personal, ritual, civic, petitionary (other.....?). And we come with different experiences, different expectations, different attitudes towards prayer. Share your understanding of prayer, the experiences which have gone into that understanding, and if you have a prayer practice, what that is like, or if you were to begin a prayer practice, what you imagine that might be like.

Likes & Wishes

Closing "As we leave this place and this company, may the fellowship of this circle carry us forward, remind us of that which we hold to be most sacred and encourage us in every hour, until such time as we meet again. Amen"

People New To The Congregation

As we planned for our program, and I came to better understand the promise that it seemed to hold for us, I thought at first that it held the most promise for new people. I imagine being able to say to people as they walked through the door, "Welcome, we are glad that you are here, and we have a wonderful program which will help you to assimilate into the life of the congregation."

It has not worked out that way, exactly. It has been members who have been around for a while who make up the bulk of the group members. And, interestingly enough, the SGM, well represented in the newsletter, has actually brought a number of people back to the church. People who we have been seeing less and less, but who were still getting the newsletter. I would get a phone call asking about the groups, saying that the small group experience was just what they had not found at the church before.

People who are new move towards participation in a group more slowly, on the whole. My observation is that it takes people a certain amount of time just to begin to feel oriented in the congregation: getting the children to R.E., what the customs are for worship, who to speak to at Fellowship Hour, what UUs do for Christmas, etc.

So, we enclose a brochure on Small Group Ministry in each letter of welcome, Membership committee members mention small groups when, as is our custom, they give newcomers a welcoming call. and we speak of small groups at the Board Reception for Newcomers night we hold twice a year.

But few people move right to small groups. Most want to feel oriented to the congregation first, and after a few months they begin to ask about joining a group.

Growing New Groups

A part of the vision we first had for small groups, based on what we learned from the Meta-Church material, was that when a group grew beyond ten, then the group would split, with the apprentice or assistant facilitator taking one group and the facilitator the other. The Ad Hoc Planning Committee was very committed to this idea, seeing in it both the means whereby our congregation would be encouraged to grow, and as a way to re-energize groups over time, as new members were added and assimilated, a 'new' group would be formed.

As groups initially formed, shared and bonded, in a manner, quite frankly beyond our best hopes, the idea of splitting these now close knit and comfortable groups quickly became anathema. And participants were emphatic in telling us so.

I just let it go, figuring that this idea would sort itself out in time. Frankly, I figured that people would begin to think maybe they knew the members of their own group pretty well, maybe even too well, and that maybe it would be nice to get to know another group of people and expand their circle of sharing. And to some degree, this has begun to happen.

But, our groups have grown by another direction. Listening to some instructional tapes by Carl George, it became apparent that a strong sense of connection develops in groups whatever their theological orientation. In practice, it is easier to "graduate" leaders from a group than it is to split a group.

So, I stopped talking about splitting, which made most people nervous. Instead, from time to time a member of a group steps forward to become a leader and form new a group. Then, when a new person fills their space in their first group, that group also grows and changes.

Adding New Members To Groups

Small groups, in Carl George's *Meta-Church Model*, are always open. There is always an open seat and members are encouraged to bring along a friend. This is how the faith is shared and how a church can grow. And in our planning, we wanted to incorporate the sense of openness and welcome of that model. However, as our groups initially bonded, many participants were nervous about the effect of adding new members, or even having visitors to try out a session.

So it was with some trepidation that I first assigned new members to a group, I did not need to worry, as it turns out. That first group incorporated the newcomer in a pretty seamless fashion. And as the months have gone by, there has been a steady rate of turnover, for one reason or another. Every group has welcomed new members and bid farewell to others. It is rarely a problem, though the common sense rules of group life apply: transitions are easier if people have advance notice and a chance to say goodbye.

People Who Need Extra Care

Every congregation, fellowship, society or group includes people whose needs or personality sometimes make it difficult to be with them. Indeed, most of our societies have stories of people whose behavior or needs have killed groups. I have come to understand such people not so much as a threat to church life, but as a challenge to create ministry which is healthy enough to include them. In the *Meta-church* material, people who are sometimes difficult are referred to as extra care needed people.'

Our SGM approaches this constant challenge of congregation life in several ways. WE seek to be caring, inclusive, forthright and clear. And, we make appropriate use of the minister's skills and authority.

First, we regularly hold up the fact that we are engaged in ministry. And sometimes that call for extra patience and caring.

Then, I assign people to groups. I consult with facilitators, and people with larger needs are placed with leaders and groups who seem ready to reach out. And I stay in touch with the facilitators to provide support and advice.

And because it is my agreed-on role to handle assignments, no facilitator can be pressured during coffee hour to take in a member who makes them uncomfortable. They refer people to the minister to be added to a group.

Then, because our Small Group Ministry groups work through the sessions, no group can be hijacked by a strong personality or two to wander off on their particular whims or interests. If asked, I would encourage someone with strong, non-SGM interests to gather a group of their own. It just would no longer be a part of our Small Group Ministry.

Then, there have been instances when groups have been in turmoil of changes in leadership or changes in memberships. On those occasions I have met with the groups, to remind them of the outlines of our program, to help them sort out their needs and to set a direction.

We have had some turmoil from time to time, but because we are clear that it is ministry that we are trying to create through small groups, because we have a common understanding of the role and authority of the minister in our program, and because of the enormous goodwill and energy which our members bring to their groups, there have been no major personality disruptions and groups have remained healthy.

The Minister's Role

The participation and support of the minister has been essential to our introduction of Small Group Ministry into the life of the congregation. I recognize the irony here. I was skeptical of this whole idea at first, and was brought along by the excitement of the lay people in the congregation. This circumstance continues to bring strength to our program; those who worked to create the program see it as their own.

There is irony as well in the role of the minister in the approach which we adopted. The Meta-church material that we studied comes from a tradition which is much more hierarchical than most UU congregations. As we considered how the program might work, and what we wanted to accomplish, we discussed the balance of authority and autonomy in the life of our congregation, and the strengths and weaknesses of different arrangements.

All in all, the program we envisioned calls for more ministerial authority than Unitarian Universalists are usually comfortable with, and it has worked well so far. I choose, train and meet regularly with the facilitators. I assign members to groups; facilitators check with me on recruits or member inquiries. I write the sessions which guide the meetings, using my ideas, facilitator's suggestions, or the ideas which arise in groups.

I meet with groups from time to time, to arbitrate or to help in adjusting to change- for instance, during a difficult change in leadership, or as questions arose on choosing topics and setting the tone for a particular group.

And as important as any other thing, I am the chief cheerleader and vision caster. Through the newsletter and from the pulpit, by recognition and encouragement, I keep people in mind of the fact that we are all called to ministry, that the small groups have revitalized the life of the congregation, that there is always room for new participants, and that the work of the small groups is the work of the church.

All of this takes time, of course, but Small Group Ministry is how we do church now; this is a ministry of the congregation. It is the expectation of the board and the congregation that a significant portion of my time will be directed to guiding and supporting this ministry, and that I will let other things go in order to do this.

Changes in the Minister's Role

It took me awhile to get to this point, and it is probably worthwhile to digress a bit, and to speak of the changes in ministry which are required in order for a program of shared ministry to be successful. In recent years I have come to understand that the pastoral model of ministry which I had observed growing up and in which I had been trained in at seminary, has significant limitations. It limits the size of a congregation to the number of people that one person can, by exhausting themselves, provide direct pastoral care to, and it suggests that professional training and advanced degrees are somehow required for the kind of human caring we think of as ministry. This limits the participation of the members of the congregation, while at the same time relieving them of responsibility for the quality of the life of the congregation.

The leaders of the congregation and I explored this, and began to change roles and expectations. They began to take more responsibility for administrative and organizational work. I began to attend fewer meetings, and concentrated more on my own spiritual life and the worship and spiritual life of the congregation.

And, I trained and the congregation installed our first Ministerial Associates, who began to assist in the pastoral work of the church. And through sermons and the newsletter, we shared with the congregation our changing understanding, that all people of faith are called to ministry and the professional minister plays a part, but not the only part, in the ministry of the church.

This new perspective led eventually to the congregation's commitment to the covenant group process, and dictated our strong identification of these as ministry groups. Small Group Ministry is the way that people in the congregation come to know and care for one another at a significant and intimate level. The pastoral life of our religious community is now centered in our small groups, and everyone is now empowered to do ministry.

Which brings me to the grieving. A change like this requires that the professional minister give up something which is dear and close to the heart. Not that I have no role in the life of the small groups, not at all! But there is grief in letting go of the pleasures and the satisfaction of the pastoral role. As ministers, we do not often speak of this. But those of us who pursue the ordained ministry are, by and large, people who care, and who take satisfaction in the appreciation which comes with caring. We want to know what is going on, we want to reach out and touch, we want to use our skills, we are enlivened by the intimacy of ministry.

For many of us in parish ministry, both our training and our inclination impel us towards pastoral care. To give that up a part of that, to share the work of ministry with others is to move into a new form of ministry which requires the death of an old and comfortable form.

One story: I heard, after the fact, that a young woman's father died. I quickly questioned my informant: it was two months ago; the young woman had been upset; members of the congregation had gathered round; she was doing fine. I was devastated. First, I felt inadequate. How come I did not know about this? Did they assume I didn't care? Then I was annoyed. Why did no one let me know? Then, I was hurt. I wanted to be the one who was there for her! I wanted to be the minister!

Then, finally, I worked my way to a grudging appreciation. This young woman had been tenderly held in the ministering embrace of the congregation. The ministry of our congregation goes on in circles beyond my participation, beyond the limitations of my time and attention. That this is so is a circumstance which is to be welcomed, cherished, and celebrated.

The firmly established pastoral model of ministry is a dance that both the congregation and the minister step to. And to change that dance requires changes all around. The congregation needs to have a wider vision cast for them, and they need to move forward towards that vision. And it requires of the minister some honest reflection on how his or her own needs may keep a self-limiting model in place.

Sharing ministry requires a letting go, and the sorrow in that letting go is not always acknowledged. But the difficulty of that transition is more than overshadowed by the energy and the enthusiasm which has been unleashed in the congregation as we have embraced a wider vision of the ministry of a liberal religious community, and adapted this form, Small Group Ministry, by which that vision can be made manifest.

Service

From the first, it was our intention that the idea of service be woven into the fabric of Small Group Ministry. We ask that every group, over time, take on some kind of service in the church or in the community. This can be simple; a group might provide the hands for a potluck, show up for a workday, help somebody move, take on all the volunteers positions on a Sunday morning, sign up together for the Soup Kitchen, or provide food at a District gathering.

Small Group Ministry includes service for two reason. One is to offset the natural tendency of small, intimate groups to become self absorbed and disconnected. And second, because a necessary component of a life of faith is service.

This expectation of our program is challenging. Many participants are already active in the church or elsewhere, not everyone sees the link of spiritual growth and service, and many appreciate the minimal demand for participation: mostly you just show up and have a nurturing evening.

But this challenge remains. We have a Session Plan which addresses service, and most groups find a way to participate. One group rejected it out of hand, but they shared a valuable discussion in the process, and I advised the facilitator to take them back to it in six months or so.

Where Our Strength Lies

I try not to accept invitations to speak about Small Group Ministry if I cannot have a lay person come along to speak as well, because I know that I did not create or initiate this change, though I have worked to make it successful. I believe the strength of our program lies in the intentional collaboration and shared vision of the lay and ordained leadership. So, the next three sections are the words of participants and facilitators, to convey some of their stories and their insights into the program.

Small Groups As Ministry

Ministry Groups are coordinated - they provide an interconnection throughout the church. The purpose of Small Group Ministry is ministry - to be the church with one another. There's a sense that every Ministry Group is one part of the whole church - interconnected. Small Group Ministry represents a different level of commitment. There's a covenant that goes with it to create a safe space in which to explore issues that are spiritual.

The intent is for Ministry Groups to provide ongoing ministry to its members and to provide an ongoing connection with the minister. This creates a true, church-wide ministry, that the minister him or herself could never hope to create alone while still maintaining responsibility for the groups, which can really help to sort out any difficulties that may arise;

Small Group Ministry provides members an opportunity to share our spiritual development with each other. The small groups tend not to be intellectual, as so many other groups or meetings can be. It's a place to explore spiritual questions.

Facilitators Speak

Comments from Small Group Ministry Facilitators at UUCC

Facilitator: Being a facilitator has been an enriching experience for me this year. I have enjoyed keeping a group of wonderful people connected with one another. I would feel much more comfortable if others in the group would share in leading meetings so I could be more of a participant.

Facilitator: I followed the development of the Small Group Ministry with interest for a long time before I felt moved to join and lead a group. My group has only met six times, so far. I am really enjoying getting to know everyone better. I love the security and commitment I feel in our group and within our monthly facilitator's meetings. Both groups have felt like safe, supportive spaces to share some of my fears and frustrations as well as my hopes and joys."

Facilitator: I have learned how to be a group member, even as I am a facilitator. Watching my group members grow to take more responsibility for the running of the group has been great!

Facilitator: Very positive. Facilitating is not a burden. Still allows me fully participate in the group topic. I do feel responsible to ensure that all people are heard and that all who wish can take part in the conversation, but I don't experience that responsibility as a burden. I have witnessed the promises of SGM manifest themselves: e.g. opportunities for spiritual development, closer relationships, deeper commitment to the church, people finding what they were looking for when they joined the church.

Facilitator: Energizing! Allows me to make real bonds with others. Rewarding to be part of building a caring community.

Facilitator: My experience facilitating a small group has been very positive. I had been a member of my small group for nine months when our original facilitator left in February, and I was asked to step in. I was nervous at first and also afraid that I would lose something in the role change: time to probe my own feelings, ponder, and process. This has not been the case. As facilitator, I arrive at meetings with more focus than before. (More adrenaline, too, but maybe that's what makes it work). I find that my ability to take in what others are saying and develop my own responses has NOT suffered--and can only hope my fellow group members would agree.

I feel lucky that I got to know most of the people in my group before I began facilitating; from my first meeting as a facilitator, I felt I was among friends. Our group is very supportive. We are all invested in the group's success, and in that sense we are all

"facilitators." When I can't be at a meeting, another long-time member takes over. We decide together which topics to tackle next, and in general are very democratic. Within the past four months, we have welcomed three new members, and so far, assimilation has gone smoothly. I am impressed with how well our small group works, and from what I've heard, our group's experience is the rule, not the exception.

Participants Speak

Participant: "The small group has been important in my life. As a new member it helped me to learn more about Unitarian Universalism in general, and the people of the congregation. Early on I felt more connected to the church quicker than I would have just going to church on Sundays. Also, while the groups aren't therapy sessions, by sharing our concerns and joys it eased the difficult time I going through with the divorce."

Participant: It's been wonderful to get to know the people in my small group. We support each other well, and enjoy good company. We've learned a lot about our strengths, weaknesses, opinions, beliefs, travels, histories, families, friends, heartaches and joys. It is a wonderful program that is developing better people, and a stronger and larger community of UUs.

Participant: This has meant fellowship and insight to me. Every two weeks I anticipate a time to experience intimacy and nurture my spirituality.

Participant: I have been satisfied with and have enjoyed participating in small group. After years of being part of the church I finally actually know important things about some wonderful folks. And, they know some important things about me. The fellowship has filled a great void in my life; also, the topics are stimulating and thought provoking. We are very fortunate to have this opportunity in our lives.

Participant: I have found myself able to talk frankly regarding my own feelings, something I do rarely within my family. I am also impressed with the ability to LISTEN demonstrated by all the members and the confidence of each person that the group is truly listening to them.

Participant: These are positive experiences; sharing life stories and sharing views, with quite different philosophies on the topics in many cases.

Participant: When I come to church, it is not to sit in the sanctuary for Sunday morning worship--I come to work. For over 20 years I have been a Director of Religious Exploration, an exciting and rewarding job, but it does not necessarily leave me spiritually nourished at noon on Sundays. My morning is filled with making sure that our program runs smoothly, all teachers are present, appropriate supplies are in the classrooms, and everyone's needs are being met. So when do I get my spirit fed, get a chance to share my thoughts, fears, concerns, joys? Small Group Ministry has given me exactly the right place to do all that. Meeting twice a month with eight other adults whom I have grown to know and care for on a deeper level, as they have me, has given me new incentive and

motivation to work for the children, youth and RE facilitators in our wonderful, caring church community, as well as given me a safe place to be nourished spiritually.

Participant: A great chance to stop, breathe, and focus on questions and topics that allow for personal and spiritual growth. Discussions have been intimate and beneficial. It has been a time to talk about spiritual matters-- a nice break during the week.

Participant: SGM has provided me with opportunities for really knowing eight other people in ways I didn't know them before. We are sharing our spiritual journeys in very personal and intimate ways every time we meet.

Participant: I thought SGM might lead to more social events with members of my group, i.e. more phone calls, emails, lunches, movies, dinners, etc., and I was very anxious about that possibility. However, to my great relief, this did not happen except once. I love the intentional, spiritual, time-limited period for small groups ministry, every two weeks, with no expectation or offshoots into more socializing. I like the universality of our discussion questions and the fact that the more I learn about all the individuals in my small group, the more I am aware of the similarities we all share as part of the condition of our being human.

Participant: I felt pretty lost and outside of the church. Having meet the people in my group in their homes and gotten to know their stories gives me a deeper connection to them and the church itself. I know them and I like that they know me as well.

Participant: It has challenged my thinking covering many spiritual topics. It has supported me emotionally. It has nurtured my soul It has made me feel part of a community of wonderful, caring people.

Participant: Small Group Ministry has given me a great sense of belonging to a community.

Participant: Interesting, pleasant social interchange. I would rather more time on intellectualizing, chewing a topic to death rather than extensive check-in time.

Participant: The important thing to me about being a part of the Small Group Ministry has been the sense of community that has developed. During the year we have shared many meaningful parts of our lives: the death of a parent, the difficulties of growing older, the joys of a child's achievement, a daughter's wedding, the building of a business, a loved one's depression. We have also come to know other's pets, learned about each other's families, walked through each other's gardens, sat around in each other's homes. The sharing of all our highs and lows, the profound and the mundane bits and pieces of our lives has brought to me a feeling of intimacy with other members of our church to the greatest degree that I have known since I joined the church in 1975.

Looking Ahead

In the beginning of June, more than a year into our program, we brought together Small Group Ministry participants for a potluck and discussion. Enthusiasm remained high, and a wealth of ideas were generated, more than a few of them contradictory. For instance, a call for longer and more intense training for facilitators and for rotating the facilitator's positions more often!

But, from the brainstorming and discussion, a number of ideas emerged. One popular idea was to have a group reassignment date, a re-sign-up date, when those who wished to do so could rotate into other groups, for a change or in order to widen their circle of connection, without feeling responsible for abandoning friends or splitting a group. Also, ideas for expanding the range of topics and the approaches to sessions emerged, including making more use of existing UU curricula.

There was a sensitive discussion of the tension and the line between appropriate, intimate sharing in a group, and the need on the part of some individuals for therapy. The healing power of human sharing was affirmed, along with a need for discernment of appropriate limits for groups in this setting.

There was also appropriate discussion as well concerning the danger of a division within the congregation between those who participate in Small Group Ministry, and those who do not. At the same time, a strong commitment was expressed to keep the program growing, to reach out to those in the congregation who may still wonder how to become involved, and to make the program inviting to those new to the congregation.

And, an encouraging sentiment was expressed to renew the original commitment and intention of our program, to invite in those who are not now a part of the congregation, but who might benefit from an invitation to become a part of a growing, vital, active liberal religious community.

Also, a Small Group Ministry Steering Committee was created out of this meeting for support, for oversight, and to continue to look ahead.