

# SGM JOURNAL

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*“To help create healthy congregations and a vital Unitarian Universalist movement by promoting and supporting Small Group Ministry.”*

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The UU Small Group Ministry Network, a UUA Related Organization, is a non-profit, tax-exempt charitable organization under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. We provide support to small group ministry programs in UU congregations through training opportunities, networking, and the development of new resources.

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**SGM Resources from InterConnections**

*The UUA's monthly newsletter for congregational leaders*

**Small Groups Help Members Connect and Congregations Grow**

By Don Skinner, InterConnections Editor, September 2013

<http://www.uua.org/interconnections/interconnections/290095.shtml>

**Keeping Members Connected By Creating Small Groups,**

Jan. 2001

<http://www.uua.org/interconnections/interconnections/46286.shtml>

**Small Groups Help Build a Stronger Congregation, Oct. 1999**

<http://www.uua.org/interconnections/interconnections/43312.shtml>

## Small Group Ministry As Spiritual Practice

*From the sermon "This is the Real Life," by The Reverend Nathan Ryan  
Delivered on October 13, 2013 at the Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge, Louisiana*

The assignment was to pick out one piece at the Art Institute of Chicago to share to the members of my seminary class. I walked into a room at the end of the modern art wing that featured one artist's works. His pieces were, in my mind, unremarkable. They were canvases painted white with three or four pieces of white wood or siding attached to the canvas. That was it.

My first reaction was resentment. I walked out, but then I walked back in. Instead of looking at the art, I started watching the people looking at the art. With maybe one exception, every person took at most two steps into the room, caught a glimpse of the art and turned around and walked out. I was entranced. This artist was renowned enough to have an entire room dedicated to exhibiting his work. And yet almost universally people walked out on it. They weren't repulsed by what he did, but his lack of something being there evoked an almost universal response in people. I picked this piece to show my class because of the impact it had on people. It was the first time I had experienced art not by looking at it, but by looking at how it impacted others.

That image of looking for the reality in the response is the theme of today's sermon. Here is an example. One of the goals of memorial services here is to retell the story of a person's life. This, of course, is an impossible task, for no one can ever fully know a person, and no one can ever fully retell the story of someone's life—certainly not in one hour.

Finding the full story of the memorialized person cannot be found by looking to the speakers of the eulogy. In a funny sort of way, you have to turn around to see the full retelling of the story. The life of the newly dead is being reborn and retold by those in attendance. Each person at the memorial service who thinks of that person they loved and reflects on their own interpretations of the stories and understandings of the memorialized are allowing that person to be alive in their mind. It is the combination of all present, the reflections and reliving through each person's perspective, that fully retells the story and brings the departed back to us in that hour.

But these connections between people do not just exist. They must be built over time. There is an opportunity in this church to engage in this spiritual practice of building real and meaningful connections. We provide you with an opportunity to touch lives and be transformed in a way that is almost entirely absent from our larger culture: our Small Group Ministry program which we call Branches.

Branches is an opportunity to spend 2 hours a month sitting in a room. You are guaranteed to spend 9/10<sup>th</sup> of the time not speaking. You will not be sitting in silence, but you will be prohibited from fixing or building or doing or pulling yourself up by your boot straps or checking your phone or pointing out how wrong other people are, or reflecting on how you and your political party and demographics and ideology got it all right. And this can change your life and hold you when you are aching.

This is one of the strongest spiritual practices of our church. In a Branches group you do not get to pick who you are with. You do not get to say that you want to be with like-minded people. The spiritual practice of the Branches group is to listen, to really listen without fixing or correcting or judging or evaluating. And it isn't easy, and it isn't natural, and you won't get it right all the time. That's why we call it practice.

The deeper belief in our small group ministry comes out of the idea that within each of us we are good enough, beautiful enough, strong enough to know what is right, what is good, what is just. When I see that happening, when I see us being pulled toward growth and kindness, I can't help but describe it as God.

The gift of engaging in the spiritual practice of Branches is that you get to be there as other people discover their soul. I can't think of a better description than these words from Parker Palmer from his book, "A Hidden Wholeness":

"Despite its toughness, the soul is also shy. Just like a wild animal, it seeks safety in the dense underbrush, especially when other people are around. If we want to see a wild animal, we know that the last thing we should do is go crashing through the woods yelling for it to come out. But if we will walk quietly into the

woods, sit patiently at the base of a tree, breathe with the earth, and fade into our surroundings, the wild creature we seek might put in an appearance. We may see it only briefly and only out of the corner of an eye—but the sight is a gift we will always treasure as an end in itself.”

Instead of looking at the art itself, Small Group Ministry encourages you to watch how the art impacts other people. Looking for reality in the response is the spiritual practice of Branches. It is to learn how to be with other people in a deep way.

Earlier this year we had a Branches Enrichment Weekend with a small group ministry expert, Susan Hollister, from North Carolina, as our guest speaker. We spent a good amount of time talking about how to listen without trying to fix or judge the other person. The controversial example someone gave was that they felt they should respond to someone who mentions that their grandmother just died by, at the very least, saying that they were sorry.

This idea sparked quite a bit of conversation. On the one hand it takes a lot of strength to admit to a group of people what you are struggling with, and the speaker wants to know that their words are held in love. There is a reasonable argument to be made that responding with a simple “I’m sorry” will help the person know they have been heard.

But it was also pointed out that the intention for saying that you’re sorry may not at all be because it is what is in the greatest interest of the speaker. It might be a desire for you to say the pre-determined expectation of what to do when someone shares the death of another. It may be that you are saying you’re sorry so that you can check it off of the list of your societally mandated responses to death. Are you saying it as a way to say, “I did what I needed to do, now we can move on?” It runs the risk of scaring that wild animal of a soul back into the woods.

In the end we decided that each listener had to discern whether their desire to respond was really to help the other person’s soul come out or was it to make the listener feel better about himself or herself? This is doing the hard work of learning to listen.

I think this spiritual practice may be particularly challenging for the left brained, intellectual, Unitarian side of our heritage. Seeing the reality in the response goes counter to a lot of what we teach and believe. There is a strong thread in our faith that says things must be rational, explainable, justifiable. It must be able to stand up to hearty debate and rigorous argument. One of the sins of the Unitarian mind is the desire for an explanation for everything, for a reason, a rationality. I can explain and criticize that painting in Chicago, but it won’t change how people feel when they see it.

We can criticize or pick apart anyone’s beliefs or scripture. We can poke holes in their stories and find their hypocrisy. It’s easy because everyone has hypocrisies. But that adds more injury and more pain to the world. No, the spiritual practice we are asking you to engage in is one of saying yes to life. We are asking you to trust that the other person knows what is best for them. We are asking you to trust that sometimes you can see things better if you stop looking at the thing and turn around to see the response.

There is a belief in this church that you are somebody, that you are worthy of the greatest love and admiration. You are built in the image of the most high and holy, and you deserve respect and dignity in this life. Right now. You are part of this great world of ours. If you want to see that, maybe you should look at the response. Amen.

**Before you speak, let your words pass through three gates.**

**At the first gate, ask yourself,  
“Is it true?”**

**At the second ask,  
“Is it necessary?”**

**At the third gate, ask,  
“Is it kind?”**

*~ Sufi saying*

## Ministerial Search Committee as Covenant Group

*By Ted Lau, Chair, Ministerial Search Committee,  
Eliot Unitarian Chapel, Kirkwood, Missouri*

Our liberal religious movement is empowered by covenantal promises, from the largest scale (agreements among our congregations) to the smallest (agreements among small group members). In covenant groups of 8-12 people, much of the work of the church is accomplished: lay pastoral care, fellowship and friendship building, and searching for and sharing discovered meaning among people who subscribe to different worldviews. As Rev. Thandeka puts it: covenant groups realize “love beyond belief”.

After a two-year search for a new settled lead minister, the seven members of the Eliot Unitarian Chapel Ministerial Search Committee (MSC) found ourselves transformed by love beyond belief, changed in the ways small group ministry can change people. We found ourselves more intimately related, more trusting, and more open-hearted and open-minded, with a great sense of accomplishment and of meaningful service together. We came out of this process understanding our different beliefs, temperaments and ways of working, and very much liking each other in our differences. In reflecting on our being together, I have come to ask in what ways the MSC was the same as, and different from, other small covenantal groups in which many of us have participated.

An obvious, but not very interesting, reason for our transformation might be that we worked intensively together for two years, meeting at least twice per month for two hours. I'd like to highlight some other aspects of our MSC that made such a difference: making covenantal promises, making consequential decisions, celebrating the unlikely with gratitude, and acting as the church.

### **Our Charter: Goal, Covenant, and Ground Rules**

Consistent with what I've done as a small group facilitator, I drafted a charter and brought it to the group for revision and adoption. The heart of the charter is the covenant statement itself: “We pledge to the congregation to nominate as candidate for Settled Minister the qualified person we believe is the best fit to lead Eliot Unitarian Chapel for the next decade and beyond.” Ours may be more elaborate than most small group covenants because we needed to make promises not only to each other, but to our congregation and to ministers in search as well. Therefore, our covenant included maintaining the trust, confidentiality, and integrity of the search process; soliciting input from the congregation; seeking guidance but using our own judgment; speaking publicly as one

voice; maintaining right relationships; and caring for one another.

We spoke aloud our covenant for a few meetings, making improvements, then adopted it, each member assenting to its stipulations. We revisited our covenant at key milestones during the search process, especially before meetings when consensus decision-making was expected and stakes were high.

Our Ground Rules for meetings called us to test our assumptions, share relevant information and opinions, reach a shared understanding of important words, explain our reasoning and intent, combine inquiry with advocacy, name all significant issues, and be as succinct as possible.

Although our ground rules were oriented toward effective decision-making, they also contain core techniques for helping persons in groups actively listen and speak their truth. We implemented the “participant - observer” technique to provide valuable feedback when our meeting effectiveness fell short of the mark.

### **A Blessing**

Since all significant endeavors deserve to be blessed when they begin, I spoke a blessing to our MSC that acknowledged our hopes and fears, spoke of the importance of the quality of our relationships, urged us to rely on non-rational as well as rational processes, and invoked the spirit of our ancestors. It could be used for the first session of a new covenant group, or renewal of an existing group. ([http://www.smallgroupministry.net/members/A\\_Blessing\\_for\\_Covenant\\_Groups\\_TLau.doc](http://www.smallgroupministry.net/members/A_Blessing_for_Covenant_Groups_TLau.doc))

### **Making Consequential Decisions**

Small groups have more impact on their members when they are accountable for something consequential. Consequential decisions invite everyone to participate, share their values and priorities, and grapple with differences. Service project choices are a good example. A dissenter must decide whether to block the majority on principle or to compromise in favor of the option. We don't want to turn reflection circles into task-oriented work committees, but there is nothing like a passionate discussion around a consequential decision to accelerate the process of building trust, deepen intimacy and realize love beyond belief. In those circumstances you feel the strengthening fire of transformation.

To achieve our ministry vision, the MSC had to address a broad range of topics in our religious life: the importance of theology, the balance of intellectual vs. spiritual in sermons, the nature of Unitarian Universalism, and shared ministry between laity and clergy. Small groups can take on service projects that similarly engage

important areas of religious life. For a social justice project, you would engage questions of how UU values relate to social policy or political issues. Similarly, writing a consensus description of Unitarian Universalism for a local interfaith journal would engage questions of cultural identity and pluralism in religious truth.

Be bold in envisioning a service project! A set of bold alternative projects is more challenging for decision-making, which means it is better for eliciting members' values and priorities and for forcing reconciliation to an acceptable decision. You learn about each other's risk tolerance, as well as each member's set point between hope and fear, optimism and pessimism.

After decision-making and action comes reflection. A reflective question often used in small groups begins: "Speak of a time when . . ." While asking members to relate important events from their past may be the customary way to build trust, after two years I know very little about the previous lives of the other six members of the MSC. Better to reflect on significant decisions you've made and actions you've taken together. Then your reflective question becomes: "What moved or surprised you about the project we did together last month?" Shared action allows the emergence of diverse perspectives about the same event.

### **Celebrating the Unlikely with Gratitude**

Several times during our MSC's two year journey we doubted the likelihood of success. Many factors were out of our control and seemed to work against us. Yet we had to persist in believing in the hope of success, however unlikely, in order to do the work and hold to our promise to the congregation.

The situation with small group ministry is much the same. There is no guarantee of success, yet you follow the process and sometimes unlikely, transformative things happen: a normally reticent man shares a deep feeling and receives acceptance and empathy; a member appears at the meeting caught up in a life crisis, the prepared session is abandoned, and a moving example of pastoral care happens. The list of unlikely happenings is unlimited.

I recommend that your group leader/facilitator keep a journal of things that happen during meetings that surprise or move them. This record can be used later to celebrate the unlikely. (I wish I had kept such a record of the "little miracles" that happened in the MSC.) Whether at a meeting to decide to continue as a group, or to answer a question for the year-end report (How did your group transform the lives of those it serves?), the raw

material will be close at hand. By feeding back these kinds of occurrences to the group, members become aware of the types of transformations that participation brings, and of the progress, however unlikely, the group is making towards its goals.

If following the detailed steps of the search process will not guarantee finding a minister who helps us fulfill our vision, or if following the guidelines for facilitating a safe small group will not guarantee that members are transformed, to what or to whom are we thankful for the unlikely events that occur? Being a small group or search committee in a religious institution makes available to us a heritage of religious thought and language for expressing our gratitude. Occasionally speaking a simple prayer to acknowledge the gifts received from the Spirit of Life is a recommended practice.

### **Acting as the Church**

During meetings and service projects, members of small groups act as the church. We actualize the vision of our liberal religion to care for one another, to trust each other with our sacred stories, to share emotions as well as ideas, to wrestle with making meaning of our experiences (both joys and sufferings), and to hear and accept how others frame their lives in terms of ultimate things (death, purpose, morality, forgiveness, atonement). Through democratic process and consensus decision-making, we act and serve as a unity, as a microcosm of an ideal religious institution. Our Ministerial Search Committee acted as the church in search of a new religious leader; your small group acts as the church in anchoring the religious life to intimate and ultimate conversations and to service to others.

Small groups can also advance other goals the church has set, such as increasing socioeconomic and racial diversity, fostering multi-generational conversation, or improving hospitality toward visitors and newcomers. Our search committee was a "closed" group and could not act on these goals through our membership. However, we held a vision of our church as more diverse, integrated and welcoming throughout our search process.

Beyond alignment to mission, vision, and values, there is a paradoxical way in which each small covenantal group *is identical to* the larger church. Two diverse sources hint at this metaphorical identity:

- A small group *is identical to* the church in the way Black Elk came to understand that the center of the sacred hoop of his people was not located only at a specific place between four mountains on the Northern Plains, but was located "everywhere."



## Resurrecting Small Group Ministry: A Story Unfolding

*By Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull, Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden, Connecticut*

Consider this the first chapter of a story old and new. Roughly five years ago, Small Group Ministry was launched at the Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden, CT as “Sharing Circles.” The minister oversaw the process, worked with a few congregational leaders to recruit and prepare facilitators, and launched a number of small groups. One remains in the chance form of a men’s group—chance, because it was open to women. For various reasons, women opted out. The men stayed and became known at the Philly Hug in the tradition of the team hug of the Philadelphia Eagles. The balance of Sharing Circles faded during an upheaval in church leadership. Small Group Ministry works in wondrous ways!

The time is ripe for a resurrection. As the settled minister enjoying my second year in this high-energy congregation, I celebrate the community embodied in the many ministries here. From experience in other congregations and from my vantage point as a Board Member of our UU Small Group Ministry (SGM) Network, I know how this form of ministry enhances community beyond the capacity of committees and task forces. My offering for you is the unfolding story of how this is happening.

In conversation with our Director of Religious Education (DRE), Molly Nolan, we agreed that SGM would serve this congregation well across generations and in adult clusters and would be a natural entry point for newcomers. A Coordinating Team was formed consisting of our DRE; our community minister; a relatively new member with clear promise for thoughtful group process and leadership; and me, the minister. We met initially as a Team in early September, with all having read materials that I provided from access to our UU SGM Network and from my experience of launching Small Group Ministry several years ago at First Parish UU in Cohasset, Massachusetts, in consultation with Peter Bowden.

Tapping the seasoned expertise of our Network and documents from other SGM programs, we began a discerning process. Our common goal? To plan and launch what we are calling simply “Small Group Ministry” and to form at least three groups, one of them intergenerational to accommodate senior youth who do not form a critical mass for a Youth Group this year. We brainstormed members who might serve as caring and competent co-facilitators, around a model of two co-facilitators per group. Currently we are inviting these individuals to serve. Our hope is that by December 15 we will have recruited and trained facilitators, clarified group meeting times and sites, and scheduled monthly facilitator meetings. December 15 will be Small Group Ministry Sunday, with worship centering on “Small Group Ministry: Intimacy and Ultimacy” and a post-service opportunity to experience this ministry in abbreviated form and sign up for specific groups. Worship will be led by our Coordinating Team; the follow-up, by our Coordinating Team and our new facilitators.

In recruiting prospective facilitators, we have crafted an overview of this old/new form of ministry so that each will know what exactly their commitment will be. And we have adapted this overview for the November newsletter, to put members and friends on anticipatory alert. Our understanding of Small Group Ministry is the intentional gathering of groups of 8-10 individuals led by trained facilitators with the purpose of fostering friendship and caring, enhancing spiritual growth, strengthening the fabric of faith community, and providing avenues for service.

Could I say more? Of course, but if this whets your appetite for how SGM might be resurrected in your congregation, stay tuned. If you would like to know more before the next chapter is written, please contact me at [revjcarlssonbull@uumeriden.org](mailto:revjcarlssonbull@uumeriden.org).

In faith that resurrection can happen in our midst!

*Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull  
Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden, CT*

## Keeping Small Group Ministry Programs Vital

By Rev. Dr. M'ellen Kennedy, Lincoln, Vermont, Revised 10/09

### Some Reasons Why Groups Get Stale:

- *Not doing service projects.* Consider doing a session on the importance of service. The SGM Coordinator or Steering Committee can compile a list of possible service projects to make it easy for groups to choose one.
- *Not welcoming new members.* Groups can get insular and stale over time with just the same members.
- *Folks don't feel safe, thus conversation is shallow.* Maybe this is because purpose, ground rules, or format are not clear. Maybe it's time for a Group Health Check-Up to clarify these. (See "The Regular Group Health Check-Up," *SGM Quarterly*, Fall 2006, <http://www.smallgroupministry.net/public.html>)
- *Discussion is theoretical and intellectual but not as deep as it could be.* Check to see if the session questions are eliciting theoretical rather than personal responses. A ground rule that encourages depth of speaking is "Speak from your experience" or "Use 'I' statements."
- *Session topics are not appropriate or of interest to participants.* Consider having participants do a Group Health Check-Up where they brainstorm ideas for topics that interest them.
- *Sessions are shallow, too broad, too academic and and/or not provocative -- especially the questions.* Strong sessions and questions bring folks to the edge of understanding, to the edge of mystery; they open the heart and inspire.
- *Attendance is sporadic so folks are feeling less connected and willing to share.* When attendance lags, it may be an indicator of a deeper concern. A Group Health Check-Up might help.

### Encouraging Continuity over Time in a Congregation's Small Group Ministry Program:

This is a challenge in all congregational programs, not just for SGM (i.e., for Adult Religious Education, Children's RE, Social Justice, Membership, etc). Having dynamic groups where the members are experiencing transformational (aha) moments or epiphanies, is the best insurance for a strong ongoing program. When SGM members are making friends, feeling connected, growing spiritually and being challenged and fed, then they find the program fulfilling. From these dynamic groups, members will naturally become inspired and arise as new leaders for the program.

- Pay attention to writing or finding (on-line or in booklets) high quality sessions that stimulate and challenge participants.
- Pay attention to regular support for facilitators (this will ensure a healthy environment in the groups) preferably through the monthly Facilitators Meeting. These meetings should: re-inspire facilitators with the vision of SGM, offer an opportunity for friendship and support among facilitators, and continue to build facilitators' skills and confidence. Meetings become stale if they lack one of these 3 parts. To build facilitators' skills, meetings can cover topics such as listening deeply, encouraging respect, inviting "aha" moments, knowing from experience, dealing with folks who challenge, etc.
- Develop a Steering Committee or other group that meets regularly and oversees the program. The committee ensures that there is a clear way for folks to find out about small group ministry and get involved, and it ensures that facilitators are being supported. The article "Behind the Scenes of Small Group Ministry" by Susan Hollister has more ideas on the big picture. (See *SGM Quarterly*, Winter 2008, <http://www.smallgroupministry.net/public.html>)
- Make sure SGM has an appropriate home within the committee structure of your congregation and that the Board supports the program. Ensure SGM has a line item in the budget.
- Make sure the minister(s) is/are in touch with and supportive of the program (if they're not already actively involved in the steering committee). Minimally this might involve preaching once a year on the power of SGM, and meeting occasionally with facilitators
- Do on-going publicity for your SGM groups and program through the newsletter column, a bulletin board, announcements, a fall kick-off, an SGM event with testimonials from members, etc. (See "Recruiting New Members To Your SGM Program" by Rev. Calvin Dame, *SGM Quarterly*, Fall 2004, <http://www.smallgroupministry.net/public.html>)
- Encourage the groups to do a Regular Health Check-Up to maintain quality groups and deal with challenges while they're manageable.
- Celebrate the successes of your SGM program in worship services and in the newsletter. Have a party!
- Keep the **vision** of SGM in front of the congregation through inspirational preaching, articles, PR, etc....

## Multi-Generational Small Group Ministry

*By Reverend Jim Magaw, Chapel Hill, North Carolina*

I recently completed the master of divinity program at Meadville Lombard Theological School, where one of the requirements included the development and implementation of a new program at each student's internship congregation. This "focused initiative" was meant to address some clearly identified need in the congregation while also providing an opportunity to learn what it's like to get a new program off the ground and running.

At my internship congregation, the Eno River UU Fellowship (ERUUF) of Durham, NC, I identified the following issues to address through my focused initiative:

- Influx of visitors and new members, especially families with young children, who did not have established connections within the congregation.
- Relatively few opportunities for people to connect across groups in deep and meaningful ways.
- Need for all to develop and enhance listening skills and to recognize sharing and listening—without trying to "fix" or debate—as a potentially transformative spiritual practice.
- Congregational interest in exploring new ways to be open and welcoming to all, especially those who are from groups not well represented here.

The program I developed was a multi-generational small group ministry program called "ERUUF All Together." I described the program in this way: "This program will bring together members and friends of the congregation in a family-friendly environment that facilitates deep sharing and listening to help build a community that values all its members in their diversity and in their common commitments to the greater good."

I identified five specific goals:

1. Provide small group ministry opportunities for more people in the congregation, especially families with children, young adults, elders, newcomers, members and friends not currently involved in small groups, and anyone else who wants to make connections across groups.
2. Facilitate deep listening and explore how to transform our lives through this practice as well as broaden the scope of our listening inside and outside the congregation.
3. Explore issues related to "big questions" of our lives and our times; race, class, gender, age and other issues of "difference"; living as members of a covenantal religious community; families as covenantal; how to live our faith in the larger community and world.
4. Facilitate and strengthen connections among members and friends.
5. Deepen connections between individuals and the congregation as a whole.

The program took place monthly, on the second Saturday of each month from 10:30 a.m. – 1:00 p.m., October through May, with the following format each time:

- Opening worship (15 minutes) with an emphasis on participation of all and an invitation to engage with the topic of the day.
- Small groups (1 hour, 15 minutes): Covenant group-style sharing for adults, different groups each week, separate activities for children.
- Shared meal (1 hour), informal sharing at tables, wrap-up and invitation to next session.

### **Program Analysis:**

#### **Goal 1: Provide small group ministry opportunities**

The program was successful at providing small group ministry opportunities for people in the congregation. Although I had hoped for an average attendance of 30-35 people each month, the actual numbers were 10-18 adults and 3-5 children. We had a group of 5-6 adults who attended virtually every session. However, the number of adults who attended at least one session totaled 61, which is approximately 10 percent of the congregation.

Of these 61 attendees, 12 were parents with young children, 13 were elders and 21 were newcomers, most of whom had never before attended a small group or class at the congregation. Approximately 12 of the attendees (in addition to the newcomers) were relatively disconnected from small group programs in the congregation. In addition, the program drew 10 people who were already involved in covenant groups or chalice circles but were interested in growing the congregation's

small group ministry program and extending this experience to those outside their circles. We were not successful in involving youth in this program.

When I originally conceived the program, I had hoped that more children would attend and that I could recruit youth to work with the children doing activities related to each month's theme. I did in fact recruit several youth who were interested, but the number of children who showed up was not enough each month to justify this part of the program, so this component was dropped. Youth, along with an adult, did help provide childcare for sessions as needed.

### **Goal 2: Facilitate deep listening**

The program succeeded beyond my expectations in this regard. One concern that I had at the outset was whether people would be willing to share on a very deep level with people they did not see on a regular basis. Each month the groups were totally different, so there wasn't the opportunity to build trust among a small group over time as there is for covenant groups and chalice circles. However, in each group that I observed, participants were sharing honestly, openly, and authentically.

In addition, as part of the program, I trained 5 small group facilitators, most of whom had opportunities to lead small groups, and each of whom did an excellent job. One of my primary roles was helping lead facilitators through the group experience and making sure they had what they needed to succeed. The facilitators are the group who will likely keep this program alive, with support from staff, after my internship ends.

### **Goal 3: Explore big issues**

Themes for each month were large, universal issues: Broken and Whole, Grace and Gratitude, Hope and Possibility, Courage and Perseverance, Presence, Forgiveness and Reconciliation, Joy, Letting Go. I wrote session plans, as well as brief opening worship experiences, for each of these topics. My goal was to elicit sharing that invited people to go deeper into exploring these issues for themselves and allowed them to be open to the different experiences and perceptions that were shared by others.

Issues of difference were explored sometimes explicitly, especially in the "Courage and Perseverance" and "Forgiveness and Reconciliation" sessions, and sometimes implicitly. It helped to have a wide age range of participants (from mid-20s to mid-70s) and people from a variety of different racial, ethnic and class backgrounds.

Throughout the program, the emphasis was placed on our personal engagement with these larger issues and creating a "quilt of wisdom" that would inform our own experiences and allow us to see others' experiences of these same issues with open hearts and open eyes.

### **Goal 4: Facilitate and strengthen connections among participants**

Although it's difficult to quantify how connections might have been strengthened, the feedback I have received has been universally positive in this regard. The sharing that I have observed has been open-hearted and passionate. I observed that the sense of connection spilled out over the small group sharing and into the closing lunch, during which there has been a lot of animated informal conversation and fellowship.

I know of several examples of people who participated in the program who have reached out to each other outside of the program to offer support—in one case providing meals and rides for an older couple who were having health issues, and in another case helping a single mother who was having problems connect with some important resources.

### **Goal 5: Deepen connections between individuals and the congregation**

I am aware of several participants who had not been a part of any congregational programs until this one, but who have gone on to sign up for adult RE classes, covenant groups, and social justice projects. Although it is difficult to gauge how much of their increased participation can be attributed to being a part of this program, I do believe that it has made some difference, especially for newcomers.

### **General Reflections:**

A great deal of work went into the front-end of this program—planning meeting space and time, recruiting and training small group facilitators, conceptualizing and writing session plans, promoting the program, and working with staff and volunteers on many small but important issues. I have learned that a small but committed core group of people can make a big difference in a congregation. While I wish that I had been able to involve even more members of the congregation in this program, I am pleased with the results. Participants were able to deepen their connections and their own spiritual journey, while I was able to deepen my learning as a leader in a congregational setting.

## Theme-Based Ministry and Small Group Ministry

*Theme-based ministry (TBM) is multi-generational worship and activities that focus on a monthly theme. Many Unitarian Universalist congregations have expanded TBM into small group ministry and provide theme-related discussion guides to enrich the covenant group experience. In this issue, we share theme-based ministry designs contributed by several Small Group Ministry leaders.*

### **Theme-Based Connection Circles in Wilmington, Delaware**

Our church is in its fifth year of worship themes, and just last year we expanded the themes to include our small group ministry program, which we call Connection Circles. Our themes encompass the regular church year, running from September through May, and our “general-themed” Circles line up with the themes for their sessions each month. This year our themes include Courage, Faith, Brokenness, Joy, Empowerment, Generosity, Peace, Confession, and Grace. The assistant minister creates three sessions each month based on the monthly theme. The facilitators are able to choose which of the sessions their groups will work with. The only complaint we’ve gotten so far is that they like all the sessions and have trouble choosing!

The positive feedback is that folks like the opportunity to go deeper with the themes and consider different perspectives on each of them. It is sometimes a challenge to encourage our groups to embrace the more difficult themes. “Brokenness” for example, or last year’s theme of “Evil.” Groups tend to shy away from those themes and instead want something more comfortable. But groups who have embraced the more difficult themes report that those were some of their best sessions. One of our favorite successes is that other groups within the congregation have asked for copies of the sessions so that they, too, can work with the monthly themes in small group meetings.

*~ Rev. Michelle Collins, Assistant Minister, First Unitarian Church of Wilmington, DE*

### **Theme-Based Community Circles in Minneapolis, Minnesota**

In keeping with the small group ministry model, Community Circles at First Universalist Church of Minneapolis are groups of 8-10 committed participants who come together with a trained leader to listen and share about their lives. These groups are grounded in the spiritual practices of deep listening and

open-hearted reflection. Our Community Circles meet every other week, either for six sessions in the fall or the spring, or for an entire year. Some groups are open to everyone; others are for people who have a particular identity or season of life in common, such as Young Adults or People of Color.

Worship at First Universalist is organized around monthly themes. This fall's themes include Digging In, No Going Back, and Prayer. The themes inform the session plans of our 24 Community Circles. During the week before the sermon, the Minister of Membership and Adult Ministries creates a session plan from readings, the sermon draft, and song lyrics provided by our worship leaders. Each session leaves room for people to bring their own stories, cares, and joys into the circle.

After the sermon is preached on Sunday, the session plan is revised to align with the service, then emailed to the facilitators to use the following week. All gatherings take place at the church building. When facilitators arrive to lead their session, they encounter five boxes filled with all the tools they will need: a chalice, matches, session plan, and altar cloth.

This congregation has had theme-based small group ministry for several years. The response has been positive, because it's an opportunity to engage in the greater conversations in the life of the church.

*~ Rev. Elaine Tenbrink, Minister of Membership and Adult Ministries, First Universalist Church of Minneapolis, MN*

### **Theme-Based Chalice Circles in Charlotte, North Carolina**

At the Piedmont Unitarian Universalist Church we have found small group ministry combined with theme-based ministry helps our congregation connect and go deeper spiritually. Our themes run in a three-year cycle and were originally created by the Religious Services Council, the ministers, and the Chalice Circle Coordinator.

Our themes are Sunday worship topics at least once a month, as well as the topic of our newsletter articles and Chalice Circle sessions. Sometimes our other committees and councils will also take up a monthly theme. For example, our Social Justice Council recently used the theme of Hope to partner with an organization bringing hope to the children of Sudan by building and staffing schools.

Each year we review the upcoming themes at our Chalice Circle Facilitator's June meeting. We make small changes to the themes before the upcoming year. The

minister writes the first draft of the session. It then goes to the Facilitator's Meeting where they actually hold the session and then make revisions after reviewing it.

Theme-based ministry combined with small group ministry just makes sense. Our chalice circle members report that they now feel a deeper engagement with the congregation. They are excited for the Sunday service on the monthly theme and discover new ways of thinking about important spiritual topics. In addition, by gathering in small groups to discuss personal experiences of grace, hope, love, and loss they find personal connections that strengthen their own spiritual journey. The themes add depth to our sessions and the small groups enrich our worship!

~ Rev. Robin Tanner, Minister, Piedmont Unitarian Universalist Church, Charlotte, NC

### **Theme-Based Small Groups in Augusta, Maine**

At the Unitarian Universalist Community Church our love affair with small group ministry continues. From the beginning, our intention was to offer ministry to one another and provide opportunities for spiritual growth through the art of listening and responding to each other. We believe that wide-spread participation in SGM has significantly improved our ability to manage the challenges of congregational life.

This year our congregation is experimenting with theme-based ministry. Each month Sunday worship, Religious Exploration and Small Group Ministry provide opportunities to explore the same theme. Our minister, RE Director, and Small Group Ministry Coordinator work together to provide materials and opportunities for people to engage the theme. Our intention is to create a community where we have something in common to discuss over time so we can build connections and deepen our spiritual practice.

The theme for each month is introduced through a packet called "Soul Matters." It is compiled by our minister, Rev. Carie Johnsen, from material contributed by interested members of the congregation. The packet includes poems and short readings, a book list, recommended movies and songs, YouTube clips and original writings, a number of questions for contemplation or discussion, and suggestions for experiential practices to deepen one's exploration. (Learn more at <http://www.augustauu.org/staff-ministries-and-religious-exploration/ministries/theme-based-ministry/> )

As soon as the month's packet is available, the SGM Coordinator provides it to the group leaders. Leaders

have an outline that helps them choose material from the packet to guide their group discussions. We encourage leaders to make their outlines available on our website so others can connect with the themes and benefit from using the sessions.

As part of theme-based ministry, we offer an open group once a month for those not currently connected with a group. Anyone interested is welcome to participate in a session created from the "Soul Matters" packet and facilitated by the SGM Coordinator. The open group provides an opportunity to get to know new people, experience small group ministry, and make deeper connections than would happen at coffee hour. Our hope is that some participants will be enticed to join one of our ongoing groups.

We anticipate that our long standing embrace of SGM will support us in this experiment with theme-based ministry and that, in turn, theme-based ministry will enrich small group ministry with creativity and even more opportunities to deepen spiritual growth and interpersonal connection at UUCC.

~ Kathy Kellison, Small Group Ministry Coordinator, Unitarian Universalist Community Church, Augusta, ME

Have the courage to be sincere, clear and honest. This opens the door to deeper communication all around. It creates self-empowerment and the kind of connections with others we all want in life. Speaking from the heart frees us from the secrets that burden us. These secrets are what make us sick or fearful. Speaking truth helps you get clarity on your real heart directives.

~Sara Paddison

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