

Transforming Our Churches With Small Group Ministry

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This paper contains a rationale and a plan to transform our churches from a "minister" centered focus to a "ministry" centered focus. It will explain how important small-groups can be in the lives of our churches. Whether churches are large or small, whether they have over 1,000 members, or are newly forming fellowships, small-group ministries are vital to church survival and growth. In just a few short years, the "idea of small group ministry" or "covenant groups" has captured the imaginations of many of our churches and ministers across the continent.

The early Christian Church had its origins with people gathering in small groups: meeting in people's homes, breaking bread together, offering hope and mutual support. That aspect of communal caring was essential in spreading their faith. When the Methodists were flowering with the leadership of John Wesley, they used small groups to deepen and spread their faith. The Universalists once organized "house churches" somewhat along the lines of what we're doing now (read *The Devotional Heart* by John Morgan). Today we still come together in churches to enrich and enhance our lives with others, and with our shared strength, to proclaim our "good news" as well. Our VISION needs to be translated into MISSION, the basic building blocks of any religion.

A good starting point is to ask why you or anyone joins a Unitarian Universalist society. It's not because you want to be on the Building and Grounds Committee, keep the books, canvass, or teach a church school class. It's not because you wanted a place to usher or teach church school. What you're initially looking for is a spiritual community which shares your values in a common search for truth, love, and justice. When people are asked what they seek in a church, these reasons are the most common: religious community, inspiration, intellectual stimulation, friends, shared values, support for their spiritual journey. They don't expect conformity, in fact, they often welcome and expect diversity. But they do expect respect for their integrity, and are willing to grant it to others.

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

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

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

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

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

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

GROWTH

Most Unitarian Universalist churches that I deal with think of prospective growth as attracting just enough members to pay the bills, get a minister, keep a minister, or add a little building or parking space. That translates into from 50 to 150 more members over 5 to 10 years. The fear is assimilation. How can we successfully integrate and know new people? The fear is loss of community. How can we know each other the way we do now if we get much larger? The result is a denomination which is decidedly, and persistently small-church in its membership. Two-thirds of the 1,000 + congregations that make up the UUA have less than 150 members, 83% are less than 250. The average size of a UU congregation is precisely 150. The city of Springfield, Massachusetts has about as many people in it (156,000) as the entire adult membership of the Unitarian Universalist Association in North America.

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

SMALL CHURCHES

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

MID-SIZED CHURCHES

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

LARGE SIZE CHURCHES

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

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

From what I have observed (20 years as a UU parish minister, and 18 years as a UUA District Field Staff person), churches grow when most of the visitors and new folk are integrated into one of the groups in the congregation. If there are no or few groups, other than committees, the choir, and a few programs, it's hard to make friends. Roy Oswald, from the Alban Institute, says that you have to make 6 friends in the first 6 months or you won't stay in a church. Seven out of nine people who come in the front door to worship end up leaving. The reverse is true with people who come into the church through small groups. There they meet and bond with others. There they are known and welcomed. There they are called by name. **THEY TEND TO STAY.**

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

The new people who stay in our churches resist growth because, in part, they

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

IS GROWTH FOR GROWTH'S SAKE?

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

ARE PROGRAMS THE ANSWER?

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

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

The nature of many of our "programs" is oriented around learning about something. Programs like "Building Your Own Theology," or "Writing Your Spiritual Autobiography," or "Cakes" tend to be more relational. What impressed me with "Building Your Own Theology" was how the experience of becoming known and offered the opportunity to articulate your faith translated into people's confidence and willingness to become leaders in the church. But, it only lasted only 8 weeks! There has been no ongoing opportunity for our people to keep a religious conversation going as an ongoing way of life.

Our concept of "full-service" congregations is that we offer a lot of programs. Our expectation is that churches should grow into full-service congregations. Supposedly, that happens at 150 barrier. And, barrier it is! Why don't more of our congregations pass the line? I suspect that most of our people in small congregations cherish the ideal of the "family" church whether they get it or not. Passing 150 is losing it. If the church offers mostly programs (teaching classes)

rather than relational groups, what was valued in the small church is lost. Hence the resistances. So, how might we develop a church differently, right from the outset, or how might we restructure, in order to provide the relational quality of spiritual development which our people, like everyone else, are looking for?

GIVE PEOPLE WHAT THEY WANT

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

TAKE AN X-RAY OF YOUR CONGREGATION

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

FROM PROGRAM TO RELATIONSHIP

What "program" does is somewhat self-serving. It appeals to our identity as well-educated, curious, truth-seekers. It is insidiously elitist. "Ministry" is not. Ministry taps the caring aspect of our nature. It puts our intellect in the service of humanity. The potential of small relational groups is to address our own hurts and hopes and those of the people around us. We are all part of the human race. We all have hurts and hopes. Catholics, Muslims, Pentacostals, and Methodists share this same concern. But, we each have our own theological twist. Ours is a radical respect for an individual's freedom of conscience. We do not expect conformity as the price of community. We have a greater tolerance for spiritual, ethical, and moral ambiguity than most people. Our lack of certainty about even our own answers to life's questions does not diminish our concern for others. I grew up a Universalist. When I came to the conclusion that there was literally no

heaven for all the people we hoped would end up there, I realized it was up to us to help the people in this life whose lives would be hell without our intervention. This is not a theoretical debating point. It is ministry. The question is: how is a church best organized to deliver ministry? I believe it is through developing a small-group ministry.

GETTING STARTED

The key people who have to be invested in the success of small-group ministries are the professional staff, esp. the minister. We begin with the minister familiarizing him/herself with the material. Then, we introduce the idea to the Board and selected leaders in the congregation. As soon as you have a cadre of interested lay leaders who want to develop a small-group ministry program, then you expand the educational process. Let me use the Unitarian Universalist Community Church of Augusta, Maine, as an example (about 160 members when they began this process 2 years ago and over 200 now).

As District Minister, I had met with the Northeast District Ministers for their monthly meetings 6 times to review the material and the videos by Carl George. I was asked to help lead an all-church retreat in September of 1998 for the Augusta church. I made a presentation to them which lasted about 2 hours. Twelve people indicated they would like to form a committee to study the ideas. They read books, watched and discussed the videos during that time. I was invited back (March 1999) to give a sermon outlining the ideas to the congregation. The following Wednesday, they held a dessert meeting for the congregation and six groups were formed (as of this writing there are between 10-12). Facilitators and apprentices had been selected to work with each of the groups. The groups meet generally twice a month. Congregational approval was not necessary to launch the plan. Ministerial support, however, was essential. The interplay between worship and small-group ministry is vital. At worship, the work of the small groups and their leaders is announced, affirmed, celebrated. Carl George says that in such a church the group leaders fish, everyone else cuts bait. In other words, the work of the whole congregation is geared to make the work of the small group successful.

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

Floyd Schwanz, in his book, *Growing Small Groups*, suggests the best way to begin small groups is to do it! A minister could simply start with 4 to 8 people and do a group, selecting those people whom he/she thought would make good facilitators. Work with them is not teaching theory, but modeling what you want to have happen. It's really very simple! That's the beauty of it. You open with a short reading, do some sharing, have a brief reading and a couple of questions to lead

into the topic for discussion, select the next theme, and do a closing reading. (See the sample Session Plans toward the end.) That's two hours for the meeting, 2 - 4 times a month. Meetings take place in homes. More on this later. But, that format is it in a nutshell!

DIGRESSION ON HURDLES

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

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

MINISTERIAL RESISTANCE

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

MINISTERIAL CHANGES

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

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

smoothly. There is some initial investment of time and energy which is replaced by a growing network of lay leaders doing ministry!

CONGREGATIONAL RESISTANCE

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

A major resistance to growth is competition for scarce resources. Imagine, in a church of 200, wanting 10 or 20 people to serve as facilitators and a like number to be apprentices! How are you going to get people to be church school teachers, or committee members? The reality is that this is a system that develops leaders, not just for small groups but for all aspects of church life - much in the manner I indicated with "Building Your Own Theology." It will up the ante of participation of our members (more "high demand" than "volunteer"), but they will respond because of what they get from having their needs met.

A church teetering between the Pastoral and Program size congregation (our glass ceiling 150 member church) has a high level of conflict, a conflict often played out by and through the minister. People are struggling to establish or maintain their identities. Some want growth; some want it smaller. This conflict is inevitable unless intimacy issues are resolved. The minister is no less conflicted in dealing with growth.

So, how can we organize our churches differently so that we can increase the level of participation, decrease conflict, meet intimacy needs, and grow with less pain and more excitement?

THE STRUCTURE OF THE SMALL GROUP MINISTRY

We begin with small groups, or "covenant" groups. The optimal number in a group is said to be 8 to 10. That also includes the host/hostess at whose home the group is held (groups could also meet at the church). That reduces the responsibility of the facilitator. It includes a facilitator and an apprentice. It includes several other people and an empty chair. The empty chair symbolizes

the group's invitation to the next person to join. It may be wise to start with fewer than the optimum number and in the first month or two add more. The group then experiences/learns growing and assimilating. This will be important after several months when more people are invited in and some of the members give birth to a new group.

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

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

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

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

The empty chair will be filled by a person recommended by the church staff, the leaders, or members of the group who want someone to join them. The key to growth, to ministry, is reaching out to include more people. You may have a friend or know of someone who could use the kind of support this offers. The potential here is enormous. Do the people in the group have to be UU? No. Should they be invited to worship? Yes. Should they be pressured, is membership a condition for being part of a group? No. What we are doing here is ministry. Yes, we want the church to grow. Membership, ownership of an institution and what it does, is what supports our ministry. But, we serve. That's the nature of the institution. Can people who are not UUs lead the groups? Generally no. They do not necessarily have to be members yet, but they should

be UUs. This is a UU church which is doing this ministry. Leadership roles and responsibilities are best nourished within the identity structure of the UU faith. The growth of a group may occasion the birth of a new group once, maybe even twice a year. When that happens, the facilitator may take a few of the newer people and form another group, inviting more to join. Or, he/she may start fresh. The apprentice will become the old group's facilitator and ask someone to work with them as his/her next apprentice.

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

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

ORGANIZING RESPONSIBLY

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

WHAT KIND OF COMMITMENT?

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

WHAT'S THE NATURE OF THIS MINISTRY?

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

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

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

WHAT ABOUT WHEN PEOPLE ARE IN DIFFICULTY?

It is a rare person who is not feeling in difficulty at one time or another. But, clearly, we cannot provide therapy and we need to be up front about that. Very large churches have allocated resources to ECR (Extra Care Required) groups, also known as Extra Grace Required. That may include AA groups and the like. If we don't have those resources, we need to refer people to therapy if that seems called for. There are times, however, when each of us needs to be accepted, warts and all. The very nature of the group helps us to minister to one another when we are having a hard time. These are "ministry" groups. We're not trying to separate out the wheat from the chaff, as if what remained was actually wheat.

We don't just come with joys, but sorrows as well. The very creation of a group or a church in which everyone there supposedly has it all together, calls into question that togetherness. Good people can be the problem in the way they subtract themselves from interacting with real life. Their lives are no longer real. They are not doing ministry. What we have going for us is the collective wisdom of the group, its leadership, and the back-up system of coaches and ministers. Having said that the group does not do therapy, but it has to be said that the results of being in the group will be very therapeutic!

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

THE WORK OF THE SMALL GROUP

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

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

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

The question posed to the group members is: what does that mean in your life? What is it that renews you? Carl George says this is not the time to address (and,

remember this is from a Pentecostal minister) the correct interpretation of scripture. The only thing that matters here is how we apply scripture, or great thoughts, to our lives - our own understanding of that. The way the group deals with that is dialogue, sharing, not argument or discussion as if the lines were to be debated or abstractly defined. We can use the Bible, or Buddhist scriptures for resources. We can use the poet David Whyte:

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

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

I am afraid of people
who cannot cry

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

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

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

WESLEY'S QUESTION

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

together in small groups, the underlying question is whether we are in a state of Grace! It is not an academic question.

WHAT NEEDS DO THE SMALL GROUPS MEET?

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

SMALL GROUP MINISTRY HAS

reconnected me to the church community.
helped me to be excited about Sunday and going to church.
helps me build personal relationships.
gone beyond the coffee hour. It's fun.
built a connection the minister without his actually having to be present. He's reaching out to the Congregation.
has helped us to know people we otherwise might not have.

DOES THIS APPROACH FIT WITH OUR PRINCIPLES AND PURPOSES?

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

HOW ARE ONGOING RESOURCES CREATED AND MADE AVAILABLE?

In the UU Community Church in Augusta, the Rev. Calvin Dame has been creating the weekly group meeting plans. Some ideas are his own inspiration, others come out of the groups. I wonder if this can't be done at the District level especially for small congregations without a minister, or even as examples for churches with ministers. In any case, doing it would build an excellent resource library. I can imagine a District website where churches could access material on a monthly basis and then distribute them to group leaders. A District could send out 4 or 5 outlines a month. Topics could be found in Beacon books like *Cries of the Spirit* and *Claiming the Spirit Within*, in books by Eugene Kennedy like *The Joy of Being Human* and *The Pain of Being Human*, in poetry anthologies, in our

hymnals, from our meditation manuals, from the Evensong materials which the Rev. Barbara Hamilton-Holway has put together in Berkeley, CA. A lot of the resources and questions we have already used (BYOT, Writing Your Spiritual Autobiography, Owing Your Religious Past) could be recycled using this format. Developing material for the individual sessions needs to be broad based. I've identified five general areas of concern of UUs.

Wisdom Circle: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Taoism, Humanism, Unitarian Universalism, New Age Spirituality

Justice Circle: Anti-racism, tolerance, peace, gay/lesbian issues, classism

Relational Circle: Family, partnership, marriage, children, friendship, listening, community

Growing Circle: Birth, death, forgiveness, illness, creativity, personal growth, conflict, change

Earth Circle: Environmental responsibility, nature, ecology, natural mysticism, awe, wonder, creation spirituality

In addition, this format is an ideal forum to deal with social, political, and other current events as they arise. The sessions do not always have to be reflective, they might point toward some action people might want to take. Group sessions might also focus discussion on the changing of the seasons, holidays, special events. What is good about this format is the ongoing nature of the conversation of people who come to know, trust, and care for each other. It's not a one-shot course. It's what church is all about.

WHAT ABOUT CHILDREN?

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

MARRIED COUPLES, PARTNERS?

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

problem. Some couples have opted to do groups together; some would prefer to do it separately.

[For the rest of this essay, click here. \(Part II contains sample small group plans, resources, and more\).](#)