

## Deeper Into Community

Reverend Sharon K. Dittmar  
 First Unitarian Church  
 536 Linton Street  
 Cincinnati, Ohio 45219  
 513.281.1564  
 December 4, 2005

Is this you?

I like First Church but I don't recognize everyone anymore. I like First Church but I don't know anyone and I don't really know how to get involved. I like First Church, but some of the people I loved the most here have died and I miss them. I like the people at First Church but I am burnt out on committee work. I like the sermons but I don't really have a chance to talk about anything in depth here. I like First Church but coffee hour is so loud and crowded that I just leave when it starts. I like the mission of First Church but I am tired of renovation and fundraising work. I love First Church and the people are so friendly but sometimes a level of depth and connection is missing.

If this is you (raise your hands), we have heard your need and want to offer something more, small group ministry. In the last eight years small group ministry has "swept" the UUA. Over 50% of the congregations in our association offer small group ministry, including our neighbor St. John's in Clifton. The first year small group ministry was offered at St. John's 80 people signed up, 80 people – that's one third of their congregation, and the groups are still going strong.

There have been workshops on small group ministry at every General Assembly since at least 2000, and it was once again one of the hot topics of my district minister's retreat this past fall. The most recent issue of *UU World* had an article on small group ministry. The Reverend James Ishmael Ford, minister of the First Unitarian Society in Newton, Massachusetts says of small group ministry "I believe we are embarked upon a project that may genuinely develop into a sustained and powerful spiritual discipline . . . this is our practice, a home-grown, completely real, and spiritual Unitarian Universalist discipline."<sup>1</sup>

So what is small group ministry? They are small groups (sometimes called covenant groups) of 8 – 9 people who meet on a monthly basis for 1 1/2 to 2 hours, usually in someone's home to discuss pre-selected topics. As our First Church pamphlet explains, "Typically, the questions or topics offered are not the kinds of things you talk about in casual conversation. The focus should be on values, principles, behaviors, spiritual growth, inspiration, etc . . . It's best not to use your time on subjects that can be addressed in other venues, subjects like politics, community issues, news events, shopping, food, etc."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> James Ishmael Ford, "A Gathering of Friends," sermon preached at the First Unitarian Society in Newton, February 4, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Bozian, Goldsmith, Heideman.

Each group has a trained facilitator, and one chair is always left empty so that a registered newcomer can be placed in the group. When the group grows over ten or twelve members, it can break into two new groups. Members of the group commit to at least three sessions, with the aim of meeting for one year. Groups sign a covenant, or agreement, among members and agree to perform one group service for the congregation or community during the year. There is no homework and no reading assignments.

A typical session would begin with an opening reading, a brief check-in (such as “What is on your mind?” or “What do you need to leave behind in order to be present here?”), introduction and discussion of a topic (not debating but sharing and listening), a check-out (“What did you learn?” or “How do you feel?”), and a closing reading. As one of my colleagues in ministry noted, “In place of the sermon is sharing our stories in the context of deep listening.”<sup>3</sup> I love this idea, sharing our stories in the context of deep listening. It is possible for every group to discuss the same theme during the same month so there is also the future opportunity to connect small group topics to sermons or adult education classes, which would be an exciting way to link our community in dialogue.

Many congregations, such as the Newton one, have numerous topics listed with related readings on their website, and the topics are tremendous; “Learning from Failure,” “Living with Loss,” “Forgiveness,” “What we Love,” “The Experience of Music,” “How Can I Help?” “Living with Fear,” “Preparing for Christmas,” and there are so many more. Imagine being in a group devoted to thoughtful sharing and listening on worthy topics. So often in the receiving line after Sunday sermons, you come through, wanting, needing to share with me your thoughts or experiences related to something I have preached about, and there is a long line behind you, and I shake your hand and we pass, sorry there isn’t more time. You have so much more to say, so much more, and no place to share it. Not anymore. Small groups are that place.

These groups do not offer advice and they are not therapy sessions. Members who have significant needs will be referred by the facilitator to other resources that are more able to address related issues. At the same time, members will become friends, and will grow to know and support one another, introduce one another to other friends here. In a quiet, unplanned, and natural way group members will begin to minister to one another as friends do.

As our First Church pamphlet explains

There is a need in every church community for richer, deeper and more meaningful relations with others. This program addresses this need. With the help of small groups, newcomers find it easier to fit in with the Church as a whole. “Old-timers” find a way to replace friendships they have lost. People join a church to relate, to talk and be listened to, to learn from others and to share their thoughts, convictions, fears, and hopes. They want to be heard. They need to belong, they want a group they can identify with and be missed by.<sup>4</sup>

It has been obvious to me that First Church has needed these groups for years, especially as we have grown and worked harder to integrate all our members. Our older

---

<sup>3</sup>Julia Rodriguez, Ed Massey, Robert Miess, “Creating Intentional Ministry in small Group Ministry” General Assembly Workshop, 2003.

<sup>4</sup>Dick Bozian, Jeff Goldsmith, John Heideman, “Small Groups at First Unitarian Church.”

members are dying and our newer members are more mobile. In addition, I hear your stories, about your geographic moves, your distance from family, your challenges to meet friends, your loneliness and desire for connection, meaning, and trusted community. Here is an opportunity for us to help you, for us to help ourselves meet some of these needs. I am grateful to Dick Bozian, Jeff Goldsmith, and especially John Heideman, who have initiated this effort, with the strong support of the Board of Trustees who also sees the needs and was looking for lay members to start these groups at First Church.

UU theologian, Thandeka explains

The collective energy of a group generates power in the individual members . . . there is also the articulation of another kind of power that operates in small group work, mutual power. Mutual power is the power of living relationships as rebirth.” She goes on to quote Jewish theologian Martin Buber who believes that genuine wholeness “can become visible only by the contemplation of all of [a human being’s] manifold nature.

Emma Noel, a member of the Birmingham Unitarian Church in Bloomfield Michigan and a member of one of their small groups explains “I was going to Sunday services and teaching religious education and was just in and out every Sunday without making many connections. Through my group I got connected with seven or eight people, and they introduced me to others. It’s been great fun. We’ve explored spirituality issues and social and ethical issues.”<sup>5</sup>

There are two particular characteristics that connect these groups to Unitarian Universalism, first the covenant, and second, one yearly project to assist the congregation or community. The project helps remind members that their group exists through First Church, and we are connected, so one project a year is offered. It could be a work party, ushering for a couple of Sundays, cooking for a Thursday supper here, or coordinating our “Walk As One Effort.” The group chooses the project though, not the minister, not the Board, not a committee, not the group facilitator, the group as a whole creates a project that expresses its gratitude, experience, and connection. It is solely the choice of the group.

Perhaps most important though, is the covenant. A covenant is an agreement created and shared by members. It could include features like “we will end on time,” or “we will live our UU Principles” or “everyone will be offered the opportunity to speak once before someone can speak twice,” or “we offer basic confidentiality,” or “we will not give advice unless it is asked for.” I know that some of you start to fidget at the idea of a covenant. But covenants are part of our unique historical traditions.

In 1648, the Congregationalist churches in America (who would one day branch into Unitarianism) created the Cambridge Platform, a covenant that outlined member, minister, and congregational relationships and responsibilities. The Cambridge Platform has almost nothing to say about theology and beliefs, which is fascinating given the time it was written, but it has everything to say about right relationship and congregational polity, where members have the rights of private conscience (or belief) and privileges and responsibilities. Covenants are fundamental and unique to our Unitarian Universalist

---

<sup>5</sup> Donald Skinner, “Congregational Life” in *UU World* (Winter 2005), 16.

heritage. We share no creed. Instead we share a covenant, a way of being in community. We live our purposes and principles in covenant in community.

My Heartland District UUMA (UU Minister's Association) chapter has a covenant. It existed before I ever entered the district. Every year we read it and every year new members sign it. I signed it when I came in. And every year we have an argument about it- "Do you have to come to every meeting?" seems to be the major disagreement, which we never seem to fully resolve, and which changes meaning depending on who is in the group. Covenants always evolve to some extent depending on who is in the group.

When I entered the district I attended every UUMA meeting whether it was in town or Fort Wayne, Indiana. When I hurt my back I was not able to, so, we as a group had an open discussion about how some of us with disabilities may not be able to come all the time. The conversation was healthy and kept/keeps us in right relationship instead of building resentments and misunderstandings. Our covenant also includes free sabbatical coverage for colleagues, which is why I covered for Reverend Morris Hudgins one Sunday when he was on sabbatical, and why four of my UU colleagues are covering for me, for free, while I am on sabbatical. These are our promises to one another, and I cherish them, knowing they show my care for my colleagues and their care for me. Likewise small groups here will create their own caring covenants for you. As the Reverend Robert Hill explains, "Without a covenant agreed to by the participants and regularly reviewed, you don't have a covenant group."<sup>6</sup> A covenant will make these groups trustworthy and special. Cherish your covenant.

Last weekend First Church hosted a facilitator training. Eleven pre-selected individuals came to learn more and decide if they wanted to be facilitators, folks like Katie Campbell, Pete Rizzo, Fritz and Ginny Casey-Leininger, Betty Cavanaugh, and Janet Schenk (and there are others). Dick, John, and I sat down and carefully thought about who would be good in this role, someone who is trusted by the congregation, someone who can facilitate group process without dominating conversations, someone who can mentor group members into leadership roles, and manage any questions that arise. Much thought went into their selection and as facilitators they will meet monthly themselves to talk about their experience and brainstorm together if there are problems. I have been and will continue to serve as a supportive consultant. Small groups are essential to our mission statement and health. I am delighted that we are ready to embark on this journey together.

So, included in your order of service, is a sign-up sheet for a small group. Look it over and sign-up if you are interested. There will be a table outside to collect sheets and answer any questions. Sign-ups will continue until December 18 (with a table outside every Sunday until then) and groups will start in January. There will also be opportunities to join later in the year. At the conclusion of the service today there will be a brief demonstration in the sanctuary of what a small group experience is like for those of you who are interested.

I hope you will consider if a small group at First Church can add something to your religious, spiritual, ethical experience, and your need for community. I am very excited to be part of this development and look forward to the many ways it will deepen our community and help us grow in love and faith.

---

<sup>6</sup>Skinner, 17.

