

# Covenant Group Ministry in Large Congregations

Or, How to Connect with Nine People You Would Otherwise Never Meet

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Beginning, growing, and maintaining a covenant group ministry program in a large congregation (a large congregation has 550 or more members) is vital to congregational health, but by no means an easy task. According to Stefan Jonasson, the Unitarian Universalist Association's Director for Large Congregations, covenant group ministry programs have been most successful in medium-sized Unitarian Universalist congregations – pastoral size (50 – 150 members) and program size (151 – 550 members). In a large Unitarian Universalist church, it is rare to have more than 25 percent of the members in covenant groups. At my congregation, First Unitarian Society of Madison, Madison, Wisconsin (1,376 members as of March 2006), more than 10 percent of our members are involved in our Chalice Groups: Covenant Group Ministry Program.

Though we have not seen a large shift in our congregational culture towards being more spiritually mature, we still consider our program to be successful because we have noticed subtle shifts and enhancements within the congregation. Since the start of the program, the congregation is less of an anonymous group of strangers than it was four years ago and has a better understanding of what shared ministry means. Also, it is better able to welcome new people. Many of our new members are already members of a Chalice Group by the time they sign the membership book. In addition, the people who have been in a Chalice Group have a greater awareness and comfort with the idea of being in covenanted communities and with the practice of respectful listening. Our facilitators have a greater understanding of a new (or to some, an old) way of facilitating a small group that is neither leading it nor coaching it, but instead welcoming shared ownership of the group. A further benefit is that our facilitators demonstrate a greater familiarity and comfort with participating in or leading group spiritual practices.

The work of beginning and running a small group ministry program may be more difficult in a large church than in a smaller one for several reasons. Among the reasons are the following: that it is necessary to plan quite carefully before launching the program, persons involved need to accept that this is a long-term strategy, and that it will require resources (namely money), there must be clear communication between

people at all the different levels of the program, and participants must be intentional about welcoming the stranger.

### **Pre-Launch Stage**

Be prepared for the pre-launch stage to take more time in a large congregation than it might in its smaller counterpart – it took First Unitarian Society of Madison more than a year. We knew that we could not begin by starting one or two covenant groups, the way some small congregations do, because in our congregation that would immediately set up the appearance of an “in” group. We did not want our Chalice Groups Program to seem like something only for a select few. Instead we wanted to begin by offering ten covenant groups right away, enough to accommodate about 100 people. Because of this, we were compelled to get the whole structure in place first, with an administrative task force, a formal registration process, all three of our ministers enthusiastic, our Board of Trustees supporting the idea, and ten or so trained facilitators ready to begin meeting with their groups. Three of us even bought a sermon at our annual church auction fundraiser to ensure that our parish minister would preach about covenant group ministry at our fall kick-off. (It was 325 dollars well-spent!) We had our launch in the fall of 2001 to introduce the program at our three worship services, with a reception after each service.

### **Be Ready for the Long Haul**

During the first three years of our covenant group ministry program, I sometimes heard the question, “Is that all?” when I would explain how many Chalice Groups we had or state the total number of people involved in our program. As covenant group ministry is designed to begin rather small and grow organically, in a large congregation it is a long-term strategy that doesn’t become successful immediately. Stefan Jonasson notes that it takes 3 to 5 years, or more, for a covenant group ministry program to grow enough to change the culture of a large church. That means that it will take a lot of enthusiasm, determination, and patience to see it through to a culture shift.

We’ve seen some growth of our program each year, having begun with nine groups. We set up our fifth year with sixteen covenant groups meeting once or twice a month, three groups of facilitators meeting with a coach and a minister each month, the three coaches meeting each month, and our coordinating team working to administer and steer the program. Our coordinating team consists of eight people who have one or more roles in our program, so that we have effectively the brainpower and heart of two ministers, three coaches, two co-chairs, three facilitators, one covenant group member, our director of member programs, and one church member-at-large in the same room.

### **Resources**

Why don’t we have more covenant group programs in our large churches? Stefan Jonasson remarked in a workshop that the “short answer is that we think covenant group ministry should be free.” At a large church, it will take resources – mainly staffing – to

have a vibrant program. Stefan, who spends a lot of time visiting large evangelical churches, says that these churches put monetary resources toward their small group programs. With the proper resources, there would be virtually no burnout for facilitators, coaches, administrative staff, or ministers because the work would be evenly distributed. A fully staffed covenant group ministry program would probably need a full-time covenant group program minister, an administrator or two, and a large group of paid coaches.

According to Stefan Jonasson, when a church becomes very large—1,500 members and above—it needs a large covenant group ministry program (with 40 percent or so of the congregation involved) in order to continue to thrive and meet the spiritual and pastoral care needs of its members. Although at First Unitarian Society of Madison we don't have the resources for a program that large, we're hopeful that ours will continue to help strengthen both the connections within the congregation and our collective sense of beloved community.

### **Communication**

Getting the word out about covenant group ministry is quite a challenge in a large congregation! We publicize our program through our newsletter, our website, pulpit announcements, testimonials, New UU classes, lay ministers, fall kick-off service, service project updates, and occasional sign-ups after worship services. In addition, our Chalice Groups brochure is available in all of the literature racks around our church buildings. It takes constant vigilance to get the word out, and even with this broad communication strategy some congregants remain unaware of what the program offers.

I continually find that many people need a personal invitation and having a one-to-one conversation conveys that they are welcome to join. Even in a large congregation, it is still important for those in the covenant group ministry program to reach out to others, one person at a time, as individual contact will more often sway them. Every week during our coffee hour, in order to make people aware, one at a time, I wear our Chalice Groups logo on my nametag and make a point of meeting people who are new to me.

The other part of communication is internal to the program. We make sure that all the different levels of our covenant group ministry program – ministers, administration, coaches and facilitators – are in agreement about how to do covenant group ministry. Perhaps in a small congregation where fewer people are involved, it is easy for the leaders of the program to meet regularly in one group, but in a large congregation this is not practical. I strongly recommend getting all the facilitators, coaches and ministers together as a large group at least once a year, perhaps for a training session in the fall. The rest of the year, we must be diligent about remembering to share information amongst us all, through our coordinating team (see above, under "Be Ready for the Long Haul") and via e-mail.

## Welcome the Stranger

In a large congregation I think it takes greater intent to get a covenant group started or to have a new person join an existing group. Whenever I place someone in a group, I let him or her know the names of the other group members. The vast majority of the time, the new person knows no one in the group. Sometimes, people who have been members of our church for fifteen years, or more, meet each other for the first time in a Chalice Group!

Especially in a large congregation, where it is not possible to know everyone, frequently we begin attending church as strangers to one another. Without structured ways to connect, we may remain strangers. In covenant groups is important to be intentional about introductions, sharing our faith journeys, and telling our stories in our groups to make sure that we form bonds with one another. Then within the group we must re-share what we have previously shared, and form new bonds with every new person who joins a covenant group. I've started to encourage our facilitators to bring nametags to the first few meetings and to use them again when a new person joins.

Some of our group members say that it is terrific to have someone to sit beside at a worship service, but this is by no means a given in a large congregation. Since at First Unitarian Society of Madison we have three worship services, we may not see the members of our covenant groups at church. This can be upsetting to some, because they finally know nine people (rather than none) and still don't get to sit with someone they know!

Many of our groups combat this continued feeling of isolation by meeting twice a month rather than once. We even have one Chalice Group that meets every other week, though it takes diligence to schedule meetings that way. Meeting more often helps people learn each other's names and faces faster. For me, an occasional miracle occurs at my church which brings us together. For example, last spring, I was at our Saturday worship service to do a lay reading and was overjoyed to find that five members of my Chalice Group were there! Only two of them are regular Saturday attendees – the rest just showed up because the sermon topic appealed to them. The topic? Silence.

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