

Introduction

Guided by reason and intuition, and drawing on new insights as well as from the wisdom of the past, Unitarian Universalism is a religion uniquely suited to this time of rapidly expanding knowledge and sometimes startling change. Most Unitarian Universalists believe this is true. Many recognize that there are millions of people on this continent and elsewhere who need what we have to offer and that service to such people is our reason for existing. So why are we managing to serve so few? Why is the membership of the Unitarian Universalist Association expanding at the rate of only about one new member per congregation per year?

The short answer is *contentiousness*. The longer answer is that because of our theological diversity, we have not organized our congregations in ways that invite open expression of beliefs and life experiences. Lacking the safety of structures that encourage the sharing of commonality-rich stories, we have attended to our differences, argued among ourselves, and scared away the spiritually needy who come to us in search of what we promise. Not that we should avoid all debate or seek perfect harmony. Any church going through changes will experience conflict. It is something closer to squabbling, however, that has often diverted us from our purpose. Pervasive divisiveness has driven away most of the searchers and seekers who have come through our front doors. Focusing on our disagreements, we ignore our

Sunday morning visitors while we draw one another into the verbal battles that some of us, but few of our guests, find invigorating. Our contentiousness has driven away members as well. In recent years, I have been struck by the lonely resignation of some strong and dedicated Unitarian Universalists who confessed to me that they were leaving their churches in search of religious communities that might be able to attend more deeply and respectfully to their needs for spiritual growth.

So I was ripe for the promise of a way to move beyond divisiveness when Glenn Turner told me about Small Group Ministry. He was calling it *meta-church* in 1997, using the term popularized by Carl George, author of several books for evangelical Christian churches. Glenn had heard the message of small group organization from an interim minister in Portland, Maine, Frances Buckmaster. Turner took her advice, began adapting what he found in George's books and tapes, and spread the message to Calvin Dame and his congregation in Augusta, Maine, and then to me. As excited as explorers on the beach of a never-mapped island, Turner, Dame, and I poured over all the materials we could find on the meta-church techniques of highly successful congregations of other faiths. It took a while for us to learn that we were not the first Unitarian Universalists investigating this territory. In fact, James Robinson had begun using small group organization in Brewster, Massachusetts, in 1982, with great success, and Brent Smith was applying his own adaptations of small group methods in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Somehow, neither these home-grown breakthroughs nor the megasuccesses of Christian churches using small group approaches had been called to the attention of our ministers or lay leaders. That oversight is being corrected now by a grassroots movement that has come to be identified primarily by one of two generic terms. From George's term *meta-church*, two names for these techniques have evolved among us. One is *Small Group Ministry*, and the other is *Covenant Group Ministry*, and I will use both in this book. Our congregations, of course, have felt free to invent their own titles; they use scores of names, many of which refer to the flaming chalice symbol, including *Chalice Circles* and *Chalice Groups*. Sometimes the names chosen are lighthearted and innovative. The young adult group at First Unitarian Universalist Church in Austin, Texas, for example, called its covenant group for people new to the church *NUUVies*, and when the *NUUVies* reached maximum size and spun off a new group, that covenant group called itself *Old NUUs*.

The names vary, but any group intending to be a part of Small Group Ministry must adhere closely to the six defining elements and conduct meetings in keeping with the basic elements of a given format. These elements are listed below. Although our churches have always had many other kinds of small groups—often

effective and highly valued—this book is about a specific type of group with particular characteristics having to do with size, leadership, and intention. Small Group Ministry provides relational groups designed to build, in the midst of our diverse memberships, centers of trust and friendship that remain closely connected to the church or fellowship within which they exist.

Elements of Small Group Ministry

Size. The ideal covenant group size is eight to ten people. The group should have at least three or four people plus the facilitator and never more than twelve, including the facilitator.

Frequency of meetings. The group should meet at least once a month and may meet twice a month or even weekly in someone's home or at church (if a quiet, private, living room-like setting is regularly available).

Format. The format must combine worshipful and/or centering readings or rituals and personal check-in periods at the start and at the end. (See the recommended format below.)

Facilitators. A facilitator is a woman or man who has been chosen and trained by the minister(s) (or in societies with no minister, by someone chosen by a small steering committee). The minister (or designated leader) then facilitates a covenant group for facilitators so that the training is ongoing and shared.

Empty Chair. Always keep at least one chair empty, to symbolize those not yet reached who need us and to suggest the expectation that a new group will be “born from” this group when membership gets to ten or so.

Covenants. During the second meeting, agree on a behavioral covenant—on how members wish to be with each other. Later, agree on at least one service to perform for the church each year. Twice a year, find a way of doing, as a group, something beneficial in the larger community.

Standard Format

- An opening reading from a Unitarian Universalist source (our hymn book contains enough material to sustain a covenant group for many, many months).
- A check-in period during which each person is asked to briefly state his or her answer to a question such as, What's on your mind today? What do you need to leave behind for a couple of hours in order to be fully present here?
- A time for the focus or purpose of the meeting. The topic or activity can be whatever the group prefers, so long as it is consistent with our Purposes and Principles and the mission of the sponsoring congregation. The focus should be more on sharing than on debating.
- The closing check-out. The facilitator asks each person for a word or phrase that says something about how she or he is feeling as the meeting draws to an end.
- A closing reading. Again, it should be from a standard Unitarian Universalist source.

Writing some months ago for my e-mail newsletter, *Covenant Group News*, a member of our congregation in Tacoma, Washington, Mark Backus, said he'd been looking all his life for the sort of experiences our small groups provide—in high school, in college, in medical school, and in his professional life. When he finally discovered Small Group Ministry, he found the experience transformative:

My participation has helped me to see the world from many different perspectives, to grow and to change, and to nurture those directions that are most likely to take me closer to that Holy Grail, the “good life.” I find myself listening better, caring more about others, thinking more clearly, and spending more time on the process rather than the goal. The most democratic and educational of all our institutions is not the voting booth or the school, but the small group.

“At the grass-roots level,” sociologist Robert Wuthnow says in *Sharing the Journey*, “members and leaders of small groups need to be aware that they are part of a massive phenomenon that has the potential to change American society, for good or for ill.” The fact that the small group movement has permeated our congregations without support from our elected and appointed folks at headquarters may be a part of its appeal to some of us. The recent shift to active Association support, though, should strengthen what is already as close to being a “massive phenomenon” as we Unitarian Universalists are likely to see, given our size.

No other significant change in how we do things has been met with so much acceptance and so little resistance. The only published opposition to covenant groups that I've seen is in a journal article by a theological school professor who dismisses Small Group Ministry as “irrelevant narcissism” that compares unfavorably with preconsolidation Universalist combativeness. Others who look back with nostalgia to the good old days of no-nonsense, tough-minded intellectual debate may feel that Small Group Ministry is too touchy-feely, intuitive, and conflict averse. We are moving away from the bare-knuckled debate over controversial issues that characterized early Unitarian Universalism, and with good cause. In the 1960s and 1970s, many of us were embroiled in the antiwar movement, while various other controversies involving racism, women's liberation, sexual freedom, and drug use raged around and through our congregations. Our recent membership decline began then and lasted a decade and a half. Many of us took firm and laudable stands based on principle and believe, to this day, that doing so was worth the cost.

We soon may feel compelled again to take similarly difficult stands on potentially divisive issues.

Covenant groups offer us contexts in which to speak to our concerns with the expectation that our views will be heard and respected, safe settings in which there can be consideration of issues without rancor. I have been present when potentially divisive issues were confronted and considered without animosity because they were raised in the context of a covenant group. Members of the group had come to know and trust each other. Differences of opinion and viewpoint that might have drawn disdain or worse in another context were listened to and heard. Such respectful interactions are at the heart of this approach to church organization, and it is my hope that Small Group Ministry can help us deal with such issues more humanely and more effectively throughout our association of Unitarian Universalist congregations.

Have we ever been more in need of a widely accepted, carefully implemented improvement in our ways of “doing church”? Ours is a momentous time of hopefulness and fear. The voice of liberal religion needs to be heard at the White House, in Congress, in our school board meetings, and in our neighborhoods. Fortunately, Unitarian Universalism is moving beyond some of the barriers that have kept us small and inconsequential for a century and a half. Over the last couple of decades we have gradually begun, in practice as well as in proclamations, to honor intuition along with reason as guides to the major religious questions. And now we are beginning to move away from what one observer has referred to as our “recreational argumentation,” away from contentiousness and toward community. Small Group Ministry furthers both trends and makes it possible for us to serve more people.

Most of our congregations get plenty of visitors. Those that keep records usually find that the number of people who visit each year equals or exceeds their total membership number. Our problem is that up until now, we have been unable to keep our visitors coming back long enough to discover in Unitarian Universalism a religious home. A well-placed leader of the Church of the Latter-Day Saints who has studied Unitarian Universalism once commented, “Relative to total membership, you Unitarian Universalists draw in a higher proportion of visitors each year than any other religious body. If you ever solve your retention problem, you’ll be dangerous.”

Covenant groups help us to more effectively welcome individuals who have not yet discovered that we offer the church homes they need. Why do people seek out churches? Many come to our congregations in times of personal crisis, wanting community and a bit of help with getting through the day. They need friends with whom

they may recharge their souls. Other visitors come seeking connection to larger meaning and deeper feeling, to a sense of greater significance. They need their lives to matter on this earth. Actually, all of us, members and visitors alike, have these needs. Sometimes we may be focused more on the personal (give us our daily bread) and sometimes more on the global (forgive us our trespasses, or better yet, help us to trespass less against others and against nature), but we bring both kinds of needs to our churches. We are right to look to our Unitarian Universalist churches to help us save the world and get through the day. Small Group Ministry is a way of saying to visitors, “We have anticipated your coming, and we have provided ways for you to meet others in a relaxed setting that encourages conversation.” Small Group Ministry gives us a way to make our visitors feel more welcomed and to serve better the thousands of religiously liberal people who need us.

Because we are finally ready and able to fulfill our potential, some of us believe that we may be on the edge of a golden age of Unitarian Universalism. We may soon be more influential in our nation and in our world, able to help avert the worst of what we fear. To speak of saving the world is to invite the disdain of “realists.” If there really is hope for our freedoms and for justice, one way of furthering such hope is through a resurgence of Unitarian Universalism founded in Small Group Ministry.

You can be a part of a quiet and effective revolution. The first step is finding and joining with nine or so others who meet regularly with a facilitator and covenant to serve each other, their church, and their larger community.

This book is about that revolution.