



FOR LEADERS OF UU CONGREGATIONS

INTER Connections

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Redesigned UUA.org Debuts 'Leaders Library,' *InterConnections* Changes

On April 2, the UUA launches its completely redesigned website, UUA.org. The new site brings exciting new resources but also means some changes for the online version of *InterConnections*.

The new UUA.org is focused on making information as easy to find as possible. Three main sections, "Visitors," "Members," and "Leaders," organize UUA resources for specific audiences; links to those sections appear on every page. The Leaders section offers resources for the specific roles you hold in your congregation.

InterConnections articles are easy to find by topic in the Leaders section. They're part of the new "Leaders Library." Visit uua.org, click Leaders, then click Leaders Library. Complete issues of *InterConnections* are also available at uua.org/publications/interconnections.

UUA staff are updating resources from the old UUA.org and the *InterConnections* archive and moving them as quickly as possible to the new site. In the short term, however, some resources may not be available.

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LEADERSHIP

How Best to Respond When Ministers Become Ill

Ministers are the ones who minister to the rest of us. But what happens when a minister needs to be ministered to? When a minister becomes ill and has to take on a reduced workload or can't work at all for a time? How should we respond to that?

The Rev. Drew Kennedy of the First Unitarian Society of Milwaukee (711 members), knows a lot about this. He was diagnosed with cancer in early October 2006. When he got over the initial shock he worried about the best way to tell the congregation. He wanted to keep members fully informed, but he also wanted to minimize anxiety and let them know that congregational life would proceed.

He developed a plan. He waited a few weeks while he gathered information about his illness and determined how it would be treated. With that information in hand, he told the church staff, then the Board of Trustees about his illness, its treatment, and what it likely meant for him and the congregation. The next day he met with the ministerial relations committee and the pastoral care associates team. He also mailed a letter to all his congregants that day, a Thursday. And on the next Sunday morning, he spoke about his illness from the pulpit. "I wanted everyone to have the same information," he says. In the next issue of the society's newsletter both the Board of Trustees and the Ministerial Relations Committee had articles expressing support.

People responded warmly, he says. He found that many congregants had experienced cancer themselves. Kennedy feels fortunate. His cancer is

one of the "good" ones, and there is a good prognosis for recovery. "There is definitely stuff to worry about, but I'm likely to dodge this bullet for quite a while," he says. He has not had to be out of the pulpit nor has he missed appreciable work.

The Rev. Charles Stephens of the UU Church at Washington Crossing in Titusville, N.J. (250), had cancer in 1999. It was treated with surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation, and he made a full recovery. He asked for advice on the UU Ministers email list. The Rev. Mary Harrington responded because of her prior experience serving with a minister who had cancer. Stephens and Harrington (who now has amyotrophic lateral sclerosis—ALS), created Healing Ministries and have been working with and advising ministers who become ill. Contact them at UURevChas@comcast.net or maryh555@verizon.net.

Some congregations feel they are going to fall apart if something happens to the minister, says Stephens. "We learned that some people will act out because they fear abandonment or because of their own vulnerability," he says.

When ministers become ill Stephens recommends they do the following:

- Talk with other ministers, the district executive, and possibly someone who has been through a serious illness.
- Keep the congregation informed.
- Maintain some ministerial presence if possible. In Stephens' case he had to be hospitalized 11 days and was out of the pulpit six months. In that period he wrote newsletter arti-

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INTERConnections

MISSION

InterConnections aims to be relentlessly useful to lay leaders of Unitarian Universalist congregations and the professional staff who work with them, providing information and resources that help make congregations vital.

InterConnections is a joint service of the UUA's Congregational Services, District Services, and Communications Staff Groups. It is made possible by congregations' Annual Program Fund contributions and the generosity of individual Unitarian Universalists to the UUA.

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cles and came on many Sunday mornings to do the joys and sorrows portion of the service, to keep a connection with the congregation.

Congregations have a role too, he says.

- Form a ministerial support committee. When Stephens was hospitalized his committee kept the congregation informed and kept him assured that all was well with the congregation. When he got better, the MSC shifted, focusing less on him and more on what needed to happen in the congregation.

- Form a caring team and a worship associates program to take over some of the responsibilities that the minister would ordinarily have, such as visiting the sick and organizing worship services. In Stephens' case parishioners delivered meals to his family and transported children.

Districts also have a role. Invite area ministers to form a serious illness cooperative, even before it's needed, to plan how to help with worship services and pastoral emergencies.

It's important, says Kennedy, to give people clear ways to be supportive. "I asked people to send cards to my home, not my office," Kennedy says. "And told them to look for the latest information in the newsletter. I wanted to minimize the mining of information when people talked to me on Sunday morning and other times."

He also asked congregants to care for each other, to understand while he tended to his health, and "to continue to generously support and enthusiastically carry on the ministry and programs of our expanding church."

The congregation needs to assure the minister he or she is needed, says Stephens. "There is always a fear on the minister's part the congregation will want to move on without me," he says. "People were able to communicate to me, in a nonanxious way, that I was valued. It's important to have someone who will say to the congregation, 'We can handle this, no matter what.'"

In Kennedy's case, the board president wrote a letter expressing support for Kennedy and reminding the congregation that he'd had a sabbatical and the society had thrived.

And what if the worst happens? At the UU Church in Idaho Falls, Idaho

(73), the Rev. Elizabeth Selle Jones and her husband the Rev. Jeffrey Lambkin were in the middle of a two-year interim co-ministry when Jones was diagnosed with a life-threatening cancer. A week after informing the congregation, they both left for California to be close to children.

The couple returned for a weekend two months later and the congregation and the ministers were able to make their farewells. Jones died the following month. It was a hard time for the congregation, says then-president Arthur Kull. Not only did the congregation abruptly lose two beloved ministers, it needed to organize eight months of services until a new minister could be called.

There were also financial issues to respond to. The congregation continued to pay Lambkin until the end of his contract. And although it was not required to, it paid to move the couple's household belongings to California. Mountain Desert District Executive Nancy Bowen arranged for two ministers a month to fill the pulpit. "We had a very strong worship team," says Kull, "and it came up with a long list of Sunday services.

"There was a lot of grieving for a long time," he says. "Everyone pulled together. The leadership listened to what the people needed." Current Idaho Falls minister, the Rev. Lyn Stangland Cameron notes, "It was very hard for the congregation. It continues to grieve, and we've been very open in recognizing that enormous loss." She says Bowen was "extremely valuable" in helping the congregation through this time.

Bowen urges congregations to call their district executive immediately when faced with a minister's illness. She also recommends thinking about these situations before there's a crisis. "Review your personnel policies now, and make sure you've thought through generous, respectful, and supportive medical leave policies."

It's also good, she says, to cultivate relationships with nearby UU and other congregations. "When you have a crisis these are the folks who are most likely to help you."

And in the end, it's all about doing the right thing. Says Lambkin, "I couldn't have asked for anything more from these wonderful people. I was, and still am, awed by their support."



Light Switch

You cannot call a room truly dark if you know where the light switch is.

Maharishi Mahesh Yogi

New Stewardship Guide Now Available from UUA

Wayne Clark, the UUA's director of Congregational Fundraising Services, has written a 171-page guide, *Beyond Fundraising, the Complete Guide to Congregational Stewardship*. It is the primary UUA resource recommended to congregations on this topic and will be available from the UUA Bookstore, 800-215-9076. The book will be available by the end of March and will sell for \$18. It replaces *Fundraising With a Vision*, published in 1997. That book will remain available in the bookstore until supplies are gone.

Beyond Fundraising invites congregations to move from "the restrictive myth of scarcity" to "a reality of abundance." The book proposes that congregations talk about money as a means to an end. Says Clark, "Money is most meaningful when we can move from a mindset of needing it to pay the bills to a conversation about the importance of money to fulfill the ministry of the congregation."

The book encourages congregations to bring fundraising under the umbrella of stewardship, and create a "stewardship development program." In addition to raising money for the annual budget, the program includes stewardship education, joyful giving, ministry and good works, and planned giving. Says Clark, "Money is presented as just one piece of a whole, and because of that it becomes a less emotionally charged issue. Money becomes just one stewardship tool to help accomplish the ministry of a faith community, rather than a topic to avoid and a barrier to fulfilling congregational ministry."

Talking about stewardship rather than fundraising requires a new vocabulary and *Beyond Fundraising* lays one out. Clark believes that the old vocabulary carries a negative connotation and creates barriers that are hard to overcome. Many terms congregations have used in connection with fund drives will change as they adopt a stewardship approach, he says. Examples:

- Annual budget drive—replaces the term "annual canvass"
- Orientation workshop—rather than "canvasser training"
- Stewardship conversation—rather than "home visit"
- Visiting stewards—rather than "canvassers"
- Financial commitment—rather than "pledge"
- Financial commitment form—rather than "pledge card"

"Without a significant change of focus from fundraising to stewardship, and without a new vocabulary to use, there is no reason to think that we will become more successful in growing our congregations," says Clark. "Fundraising emphasizes the need of the recipient, while stewardship addresses our spiritual need to give. Leaders understand that stewardship is an act of worship."

About Wayne Clark

Wayne Clark holds a doctorate in human and organizational systems and has been an organization development consultant for more than 25 years. He has consulted with more than 300 faith communities, nonprofit organizations, and educational institutions. Clark lives in Portland, Maine.

Forum

The following letter is in response to the article "Meaningful Worship Requires Attention, Focus," in the Fall 2006 issue of *InterConnections*, in which a minister suggested that joys and sorrows, children's stories, and announcements impede worship. This is the fourth letter on this topic to be published and *InterConnections* believes the topic has been covered: "If joys and concerns are not voiced, if immediately on-going activities are not announced, if babies who might cry are eliminated from the meeting room, visitors will never know who and how we are, and that we really care about each other. Young families will go away resentful and UUism will be reduced to the common denominator of most Christian churches where the minister or priest is the (only) important person.

Dare I cry "Heresy!?" "Vox populi" is a concept that has been the backbone of UU churches from their founding. It must be safe-guarded with tender care.

—Anne Slater

First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia

UU University Back Again Before GA

UU University, a day and a half of workshops for congregational leaders, will be June 19-20 in Portland, Ore., immediately before General Assembly 2007. UU University was held for the first time last year, and participants asked that it be held again.

Keynote speaker will be Gil Rendle, author of *Leading Change in the Congregation* and a senior consultant at the Alban Institute. There will be three workshop tracks: fostering generosity, growing our faith, and sharing our leadership. UU University will not conflict with GA. The program begins at 9 a.m. June 19 and concludes at 12:30 p.m. June 20. Fee is \$125 and is separate from GA fees. Find out more at uua.org/uuuniversity. All lay leaders are invited to attend, and especially presidents, treasurers, and membership chairs.

Web Resources

Now you can find a variety of helpful resources online in the new Leaders Library on UUA.org!



CLF Offers Expanded RE Express Resources

The Church of the Larger Fellowship is expanding the offerings within RE Express, its monthly email bundle of religious education resources. The resources, developed by the Rev. Lynn Ungar, CLF minister for lifespan learning, are free to CLF members and \$129 annually to nonmembers at clfu.org/re/express.html. RE Express Plus includes:

- “CLiF Notes”: a weekly RE curriculum for families and small groups, is focused this year on the “sources of our living tradition.” Designed for smaller programs with multi-age groups, “CLiF Notes” can be adapted for use in age-graded classrooms; used by churches which have two Sunday services, with a smaller program at one of the service times; or for programs which incorporate monthly worship for children of all ages.
- RE Index of Resources: a searchable index to hundreds of CLF religious education resources available on the Internet.
- KidTalk webpage for kids: With links to activities and information about holidays around the world, UU history and principles, social justice, spiritual practices, and a forum for kids to ask questions on religious topics, each month KidTalk provides a way for kids to connect to UUism, and for parents and educators to glean ideas for religious education.
- REsources for Living: Each month Ungar writes a column inviting kids (and grown-ups) to reflect on matters from how to celebrate holidays to what it means to be a UU.

About InterConnections

InterConnections is published four times a year and is sent free of charge to members of governing boards and professional staff of congregations. Others can read it on the Internet at <http://uua.org/publications/interconnections/index.shtml>. Sign up for email announcements when each new issue is online at lists.uua.org/mailman/listinfo/interconnections-l.

Readers are invited to make copies of articles as needed.

NOURISHING THE SPIRIT

Congregational Openness Leads to Greater Diversity

Rae Ann DeVargas is a longtime Unitarian Universalist who also loves her Hispanic and Roman Catholic heritage. For years she'd thought about how nice it would be to share some of that heritage with the members of her church, All Souls UU in Kansas City, Mo. (517 members).

Her minister, the Rev. Jim Eller, heard that she wanted to present the Celebration of Our Lady of Guadalupe, a commemoration of the appearance of the Virgin Mary to a Mexican man in 1531, and he encouraged her to do it.

That's how on Sunday morning, December 3, All Souls was transformed by two presentations of the Celebration of Our Lady, one of the most important days of the year to many Roman Catholics in North America and elsewhere. The services were complete with mariachis, dancers, and drumming. “The church was packed,” says DeVargas. “The reception was very positive.” The services included the story of Our Lady of Guadalupe, and a prayer written by farmworker activist Cesar Chavez.

Taking part in the service was the Rev. Patricia Jimenez, a UU community minister from Minneapolis and the chair of LUUNA (Latino/Latina UU Networking Association).

Jimenez would like to see more such celebrations by UU congregations. That would go a long way, she said, toward making people of different cultures feel welcome in our midst and would broaden our own horizons.

“There will be some, in many cultures, who will respond to our message,” says Jimenez. “We need to be asking the question of who is in the room with us.” She adds: “There may be people who are made uncomfortable by things we do. Some might feel excluded by the readings we select or the music we sing. Be open to change. When you choose a piece of music or a reading think about doing some education around it.”

Get to know people, she says. Ask people, respectfully, about themselves. “These conversations have to take

place in every single committee meeting, every staff meeting, and in worship. We need to remind ourselves that there are differences among us.” She notes that at times, if we are intentional about making our congregations multicultural, we need to be willing to hear Christian language, especially around holidays or celebrations.

The UUs of Clearwater, Florida, a congregation of 338 members, puts a lot of effort into being welcoming to everyone. The Rev. Abhi Janamanchi estimates at least 10 percent of the congregation is of color. He attributes that to the following factors: the congregation's participation in antiracism and antioppression programs like the UUA's Journey Toward Wholeness, its intentionality about including people of color in all aspects of congregational life, and the congregation's visibility in the community in support of social justice for farm workers and others.

Janamanchi, who is of Indian descent, says it helps that visitors can see that he is a person of color who is comfortable in his religion. And it is helpful that members are not afraid to make mistakes, he says. “There have been situations when individuals without realizing it have made comments that were perceived as inappropriate or racist. Rather than take umbrage people have sat down and talked it through. We seem to be developing a permission-giving culture here.”

Resources

Find resources for congregations wanting to engage in antiracist, antioppression, and multicultural endeavors at uua.org in the Leaders area. More information is at the website for UU Allies for Racial Equity, uuallies.org. Contact Jimenez: revjimenez@earthlink.net. Materials used in the Kansas City service are available from Jane Gilbreath: abkwitch@gmail.com. DRUUMM (Diverse and Revolutionary UU Multicultural Ministries, druumm.org, is a resource for people of color. UUs for Jewish Awareness, uuja.org, can offer advice about ways of being inclusive.



MONEY

Motivation Key Factor In Budget Drive Success

When a congregation becomes motivated to improve its annual budget drive great things are possible.

Members of High Plains Church Unitarian Universalist in Colorado Springs, Colo. (143 members), want to build a larger facility to accommodate their growth, which has been running at 15 to 20 percent. In the spring of 2006 the congregation held a budget drive that involved the whole congregation in one-on-one stewardship conversations, something it had not done for several years.

The drive brought in \$20,000 more than the goal of \$120,000, says the Rev. Matthew Johnson-Doyle. "It was a big job and it would be hard to do it every year, but it did build financial strength," he says.

The congregation brought in UUA fundraising consultant and UU Congregation of Atlanta, Ga. (642), member Larry Wheeler to help it get organized. "We wanted a strong annual stewardship drive under our belt before launching a capital campaign to buy property," says Johnson-Doyle. "We didn't believe Larry when he said a drive like this would build community, but it did. People really got to know each other."

It helped that the congregation had been doing other things right. "We've learned to ask for financial commitments from people when they join," says Johnson-Doyle. "People who have never been part of a church have no idea what the expectation is. They want to know what they're supposed to do." A helpful tool has been the UUA's Suggested Fair Share Giving Guide (available on uua.org), says Johnson-Doyle. The median pledge for the congregation is \$1,200.

The UUCA is in an interim ministry period. As it looks forward to the next chapter of its life it wants to expand its social justice programming, create a campus ministry, and hire more staff. To do that, members are demonstrating that they're motivated to raise the necessary money.

The budget drive this past fall raised about \$790,000, well over the unspoken goal of \$775,000. The previous year's drive was also over the top, by about \$40,000. Interim minister the Rev. David Keyes has helped the congregation think about stewardship in new ways the past two years. Last fall the whole congregation engaged in one-on-one stewardship conversations. "It was a lot of work," says Keyes, "but it was the only way we were going to get what we wanted."

He adds: "I have never been involved with a budget drive that was not successful. It depends on how willing the congregational leadership is to do things in new ways. I ask people to take risks, have courage, show some passion for the mission, and follow through. That always leads to greater generosity."

The following factors have contributed to stewardship success at UUCA: Keyes tells the congregation he's committed to a full 10 percent tithe and invites members to commit to at least 5 percent. He preaches two stewardship sermons, both of them weeks before the budget drive begins. He believes they do more good then, rather than on the day the drive starts. Wheeler trained visiting stewards this year. Church consultant Michael Durall spoke at the budget drive dinner. Members presented testimonials at each service for several months, sharing how important the church was to them. As a result the median gift at UUCA went from \$850 in 2005 to \$1,200 this year.

Both High Plains and UUCA give away their Sunday offering and believe that this results in higher overall giving. "People see the money going out the door, and they feel good about how it's being used. They realize the church depends on their commitments," says Keyes. UUCA gives away \$8,000 a month. At High Plains \$200 to \$600 is donated one Sunday a month. Says Johnson-Doyle, "Members really like that we do that. I think generosity leads to more generosity."

Borrow Listening Tool From Accessibilities Office

Ten percent of adults are hard of hearing, and one in four over the age of 65 experiences difficulty hearing spoken words clearly. Studies have shown that nine out of ten people who cannot hear what is being said during services drop out of congregational life.

A sound system is a good first step, but is not sufficient for some people who are hard of hearing, says the Rev. Devorah Greenstein, the UUA's accessibilities program associate. Signals from a conventional sound system travel through the air and can be distorted. The next step, an assistive listening system, costs about \$1,000 and enables more people to hear. Signals from such a system do not travel through the air and thus do not suffer distortion.

Congregations and other UU groups interested in a "demo" assistive listening kit can borrow one from the accessibilities office in order to determine if they wish to purchase their own. The kit is about the size of a large attaché case and can be used whether or not you have a sound system.

For more information contact Greenstein at dgreenstein@uua.org.

Association Sunday Oct. 14

Sunday, October 14 has been designated by the UUA as "Association Sunday." Congregations are asked to hold a service on the theme of "Growing Our Faith Through Growing Our Numbers." Worship materials will be available on this theme and congregations are asked to take up a special collection for the "Now Is the Time" fund raising campaign which will be used for national marketing and growth outreach projects.

For more information send an email to AssociationSunday@uua.org, or email the Rev. Stephan Papa at spapa@uua.org. You can also call Cherisse Haakonsen at 617-948-6544, or send her an email at chaakonsen@uua.org. Association Sunday is anticipated to be an annual event through 2011.

Spread the Word

Don't worry about copyright: Make all the copies of *InterConnections* you want for others in your church.



Starr King Plans Online Certifications For Lay Leaders

Starr King School for the Ministry in Berkeley, Calif., will launch a new online certificate program in the fall of 2007 for Unitarian Universalist lay leaders and clergy.

The Seminary for the Laity will help church administrators, religious educators, and ministers, as well as Unitarian Universalist Association leaders and those involved in nonprofits, learn leadership skills for more effective engagement in congregational, denominational, and community life.

The program will feature flexible learning methods and will be directed by Helen Bishop, who holds an Ed.D. in organizational leadership and has an extensive background working with UU congregations, districts, and affiliated organizations.

In four- to eight-week courses, Starr King will help students build skills such as the ability to use Appreciative Inquiry as a strategic planning tool, establishing and working within a behavioral covenant, conflict management, and developing social justice leadership in a UU context.

The courses are designed to explore and expand lay leaders' understanding of Unitarian Universalist theology, history, and polity. With this preparation, students can improve partnerships with ministers, church administrators, and other congregants.

Information will be posted on the Starr King website, sksm.edu, this spring, and will also be available in coming months on the school's email journal. Sign up for it on the website.

Leadership Institute Set in Pennsylvania

Leadership teams from congregations are invited to attend the UU Leadership Team Institute sponsored by four UUA districts and the Murray Grove Association, July 28-August 3 at Juniata College, in Huntingdon, Pa.

The cost is \$575 per person including meals. Tracks are congregation development and growth, family ministries, governance, justice-making, and small group ministry. Sponsoring districts are Joseph Priestley, Metro New York, Ohio-Meadville, and St. Lawrence.

More information is available at murraygrove.org.

TOOLBOX

Men's Groups Important Congregational Resource

When a number of men at River Road Unitarian Church in Bethesda, Md. (656 members), bought seats at a "gourmet men's dinner for eight" at the annual church auction in 1986, they had no way of knowing they'd be forming a group that would have a profound effect on their lives.

That dinner evolved into the Men's Night Out group (MNO), which is still going strong two decades later. The men meet every fifth or sixth Friday night. A period of welcome is followed by a 45-minute check-in and then the men sit down to a potluck meal. During and after the meal they discuss a topic they have picked in advance. The meeting adjourns by 11 p.m.

One of the original members, Dwight Cramer, says, "Some of the most meaningful events in my life have occurred with this group of men. The breadth of knowledge among the members has inspired me and discussions of current events provided meaningful and useful information."

John Kelly says the group has helped him and other members through major life events. "Perhaps even more important has been the simple fact of male friendship that the group has provided," he says. "Over the years I've had numerous work colleagues, tennis buddies, and so on, but extremely rarely would these friendships provide opportunities for exploring personal issues in any depth."

Jeremiah Cohen joined the group less than a year ago and at 39 is one of its youngest members. "I like getting to know the older guys and having a sense of generations and history and knowing men who are comfortable hugging each other and talking about things," he says. "I've discovered so much about myself—and the challenges that face me—by just listening to this wonderful group of men."

A men's group is a valuable resource for any congregation. To form one, hold an event or potluck about men's issues. Include a speaker or video such as A Gathering of Men, Bill Moyers' inter-

view with Robert Bly.

There are several types of men's groups:

- **Social group:** Monthly dinners, sporting events, card-playing, hiking, camping.
- **Service group:** Occasional group providing service to the congregation or community.
- **Discussion group:** Begins with check-in allowing personal sharing, followed by discussion of an issue relevant to men.
- **Support group:** Permits deep sharing in a trust-based environment.

Davis Johnson, at 88, is the oldest member of the MNO group. Members have advised him as he met several medical crises, joined him in racial justice work, and encouraged him in starting a mentoring program for youth.

"My life has been greatly enriched by being a member of this group," he says. He says topics such as, "Why we are Unitarians" and "What I do or don't get from River Road Unitarian Church" have inspired men in the group to become involved in church leadership roles.

A men's group can also give men another place to connect at church. Says Davis: "I encourage UU men of all ages to consider starting and/or joining similar groups."

RESOURCES

The members of the River Road Men's Night Out group have created a 7,500-word description of their group that will be useful to men considering forming or joining a men's group. In the article, edited by Davis Johnson, the men describe the structure and operation of the group and talk about the ways in which it is important to each of them. Find the article at uumen.org.

For information and resources contact the UU Men's Network (UUMeN), 5307 NW 118th Ave., Coral Springs, FL 33076, uumen.org; info@uumen.org. And see the Leaders section of uua.org for previous InterConnections articles on men's groups.



MEMBERSHIP

Small Group Ministry Requires Commitment

The glass is half-full for many small group ministries in our congregations, say leaders of the small group ministry movement. Six years ago congregations were invited to start such ministries and an estimated 60 to 70 percent have. And now, some leaders of the movement say it's time to take a look at whether these ministries are as successful as they can be.

The Rev. Calvin Dame, one of the founders of the small group ministry movement, speaks frequently at congregations, cluster meetings, district events, and General Assembly about the value of small group ministry. As he's watched the movement progress, he's recently come to the conclusion that small group ministry in our congregations often falls short of what it could achieve.

First, the good news. Wherever they are established, small groups provide members with a social and a support network. They provide a place where people who are new to a congregation can quickly make friends.

But too often, believes Dame, the groups fail to meet a higher goal, that of helping people develop a deeper spirituality, discover how they want to serve the church or the larger community, and help the church grow. "Many congregations never really embraced the possibility of transformation," said Dame. "Certainly there is value in having many social and support groups, but as a religious people we ought to be asking how these groups can help people discover their own ministries and help the church become more than it is."

Peter Bowden is a small group consultant and one of the founders of the UU Small Group Ministry Network, an independent affiliate of the UUA. "We have yet to see the growth that is possible with small group ministry," he said, noting that many congregations struggle just to maintain the groups they have. "While some congregations have experienced significant growth through this ministry, many are expe-

riencing stagnation after their initial launch of small groups."

There is a natural tendency, he said, for a congregation to start a strong small group program and then, when it is functioning well, put it on "auto pilot" and turn attention to other programs. "Small group ministry requires continual leadership, energy, and support," he said.

Often, he said, new small group leaders don't get the same level of training as leaders involved when the ministry was launched. "It is common for congregations to spend a full year studying, planning, and building a compelling vision for small group ministry for their community. If the small group ministry leadership does not continue to communicate this vision over time, group energy and participation can decline."

M'ellen Kennedy, the other coordinator of the UU Small Group Ministry Network, says, "Small group ministry can indeed transform how we do church, if we do it well, to its fullest."

It is not too late, says Dame. "What it takes is for a congregation to determine that this is one of the most important areas it can focus on if it wants to grow and if it wants to deepen the lives of its friends and members. People seek out churches because they want connection with other people and because they want to find more meaning for their lives and make a difference in the world. Small groups can do both."

NEXT TIME: In the summer issue of *InterConnections* we'll profile congregations that have thriving small group ministry programs.

RESOURCES

Go to smallgroupministry.net for related resources, including books, group topics, SGM Quarterly journal, and personal advice from small group leaders. For more information, email Dame at cdame@uua.org, Bowden at peter@uuplanet.org, and Kennedy at mellen@smallgroupministry.net.

Keep Military Members Connected With Own Social, Electronic Group

Many friends and members of the Unitarian Church of Norfolk, Va., are in the military or work in the defense industry. To keep them connected, Lou Portella, a First Class Petty Officer with 19 years in the U.S. Navy, organized a military support group, UUniforms.

"Sometimes there's a fine line to walk being a UU and in the military," says Portella. "And the war itself is troubling to some of us. The group is a place where we can talk about all of that and support each other." The group's main focus is to be a safe haven for liberal military members, their loved ones, and anyone with connections to the military without fear of being ridiculed for differing opinions.

The group has a website, uuniform.org/forum, with a discussion forum. Members use the site to stay connected, maintain communication with members in Iraq and other areas, and organize projects. The group involves the congregation in service projects, including sending cards and packages to Iraq, recycling cell phones, and supporting veterans. They also host a monthly meet-up.

Portella, who can be reached at uulouie@gmail.com, says the website costs \$15 a month and takes about 10 to 20 minutes a day to maintain.

Green Building Awards

The UUA is launching a Green Construction Award Pilot Program to encourage congregations to design, construct, renovate, and operate buildings in energy-saving ways.

The program begins on April 23. Awards of \$5,000 to \$10,000 are being offered to congregations who seek and receive LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification. This money will help toward compensating congregations for the cost of the LEED certification process.

LEED is a program administered by the United States Green Building Council, and is a nationally recognized benchmark for green construction.

More information is available online at uua.org and at the LEED website, usgbc.org. For information on the Green Building Awards contact Wayne Clark, director of Congregational Fundraising Services, at wclark@uua.org, or 207-829-4550.



QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

In this feature we seek out answers to questions of broad interest, drawing on experts in congregations, the UUA, and elsewhere. To submit a question, please write to *InterConnections*, 8800 Norwood, Leawood, KS 66206, or email dskinner@uua.org.

Q My congregation enrolled in the new UUA health plan late last year. Now we'd like to add a staff member. Is that possible?

A Yes, says Jim Sargent, UUA health plan director. Enrollment in the health plan is open at any time for new hires, for newly added dependents, for people whose hours have increased so that they meet the 1,000 hours-per-year threshold, and for people who have lost coverage they had through a spouse.

Congregations enrolled in the new health plan, which became effective January 1, can email healthinsurance@uua.org to find out about opportunities to add staff to the plan during the year and learn about new bill payment options that will be available in the second quarter of the year.

All congregations are eligible to take advantage of a "Section 125 Plan," allowing employees to make all of their contributions to medical and dental plans pre-tax, says Sargent. The UUA website has templates for both the Section 125 Plan that a congregation can adopt and the employee election form, which allows the employee to make an irrevocable choice for the rest

of 2007, with the option to renew that choice each calendar year.

Sargent says the plan will offer online payment options in coming months. Participants will be notified of it by mail. Watch uua.org for the latest information on the health plan.

Q Do you know of any UU churches that have RE for children before the church service? We are finding that at our new building the number of children is increasing, our RE space is limited, and we have noise from RE during the service. I see several advantages to having RE before the service. The teachers wouldn't have to miss the service. We could accommodate more children, and have parents involved in adult RE. I have not been able to sell this idea to the RE committee because they don't think children can sit through a service. They also want to know if any other churches use this model. Do you know?

A The Rev. Pat Hoertdoerfer, District Program consultant for the New Hampshire/Vermont District and former Family, Children's, and Intergenerational Programs director for the UUA, replies, "As a small fel-

lowship with energetic and committed leadership, I love your creative thinking about RE possibilities. A number of congregations have an hour of life-span RE followed by an hour of intergenerational worship. Here's what I have learned from the congregations that have successfully implemented this RE/worship model:

The whole congregation needs to be educated about this model. The Board needs to take a formal (educated) vote in the name of the congregation on implementing this model with the requirements for leadership, staffing, space, and resources in place. The Board, worship committee, minister, RE committee, and DRE need to own the intergenerational worship decision and cooperate to make it work. The model needs to be evaluated periodically and revised as needed. A defined trial period for this model helps to relieve anxiety about this major change.

*Does your congregation make this type of RE hour work? We want to hear about it—the good and bad. Write to dskinner@uua.org and we'll share your stories in *InterConnections*.*



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For Lay Leaders of UU Congregations

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