

## Intimacy and Ultimacy: Small Group Ministry in Our Church

Williamsburg Unitarian Universalists

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Sara Mackey©

The room was chilly; we had our coats draped around our shoulders and we gazed longingly at the tiny flame of the chalice in the center of our circle. The dim light in the room encouraged the softness of our voices as we came to the end of our time together. “I was pretty frazzled when I came in,” said one person. “I feel better now.”

It is not unusual to hear a comment such as this one at the end of a small group meeting, and yet it’s difficult to identify anything as typical when you talk about small group ministry, or covenant group ministry. As facilitator of a small group at my own church, UU Community Church in Glen Allen, I learned to show up, bring the reading, and let the river run. The outcome would be what it needed to be, without too much intervention on my part. “I feel better now” is a comment we heard frequently. Here are some other comments, not heard frequently, but which give a sense of the range of conversation we shared in our group.

“How much mulch would we need if we wanted to build a labyrinth out in the back? And what would we have to dig up?”

“I heard you say you didn’t believe in God. I read somewhere about somebody else who said that, and his friend told him, “That doesn’t make any difference to God.”

“They told me I wasn’t nice enough to people on the telephone. I don’t know what they expect, when people ask such dumb questions. Now they’re making me go to classes to teach me to be nice.” Later, when another member spoke of a difficult relative, this same person offered, “You want *me* to call her up?”

“Yeah, that’d be great” was the response, “but make sure you do it before you go to those classes where you learn to be nice.”

“I wish we had more in our church that was sacred. The theology of my old church was oppressive, but I miss that sense of being in a sacred place when I was there.”

“I almost didn’t come tonight. I got home late, and I was so tired. But I knew I should, and of course now I’m glad I’m here.”

“I’m always so grateful for the level of trust that exists among us.”

“This is the only place I have where I get to talk about these things.”

Why do we do small group ministry? For many reasons, and one of the most important ones is in that very statement...there are some things that we don’t get to talk about anywhere else. How many times have you listened to a sermon and wished for the opportunity to talk to somebody afterwards...not necessarily the minister, just have a rich conversation about your own thoughts and reactions? Is a sermon something you’re likely to talk about at work while you’re on break? In this culture, you may be able to talk about a TV show or a movie at work, and chances are good that others in your workplace will know what you’re talking about. I would be surprised, though, to hear about someone going in to work tomorrow and saying, “We’re starting covenant groups in my church. What do you all think about those?”

In covenant groups, we create space for each other to go deep, to think about and process with others questions that we rarely get to share. We invite each other to open ourselves to questions we might not know we had, ideas we may be engaging for the first time out loud. There is an effervescence, a joy, that comes with realizing that we haven’t thought of all our ideas yet, and covenant groups can guide us to that wonderful place of discovery that is so nourishing to our spirits. Covenant groups also intentionally create a space where it’s safe to share those ideas that we don’t normally offer up very freely.

Another reason for establishing small group ministry is to serve the church. One vital component of small group ministry is the service project that each group decides to offer. This can be service to the congregation or to the community outside the church, and it can be whatever the group decides together to do. There are resources to support the group with ideas for service projects, and often the challenge is choosing just one project from the many excellent ideas generated by the group. As you know, when you participate in serving with other people, the connections that can form last for a long time, create networks for further service and social activities, and open the way for strong bonds of friendship to form.

Another valuable aspect of the service project and of small group ministry in general, is that it offers new people an opportunity to get to know a few other members well. As a congregation grows, it takes longer to find those connections that encourage people to stay. Some who have researched church growth say that if that connection doesn't occur in the first three months, a new member will not continue to attend, and those connections need to be more than just social. People who seek church are usually not looking just for somebody to have coffee with once in a while; they're yearning to belong. Small group ministry responds to that yearning, and not only for new members. Long-time members, too, can be nourished in small groups, can feel that sense of belonging.

So...why do we do covenant groups? So that we can pay more attention to our own spiritual identities and religious values in a safe and encouraging context: ultimacy. So that we can serve the church or the larger community with our friends: intimacy. Now *how* do we do it? It is very difficult to explain to you what will happen in a covenant group, because that depends on the nature of the group and the topic for focus. I *can* tell you, though, something about how the process will evolve here at Williamsburg UU. I'm happy to announce that you can find out all about this on the Williamsburg UU website, and if you have questions, you can talk to the small group ministry steering committee. I'm going to ask them to stand if they're here: Sally Fisk, Pat Winter, Jan Brown, David Hamilton. Also Rev. Jennifer Ryu, who is away for the summer. Every Sunday during the month of August, you will be given an opportunity to sign up to participate in small groups. The first step will be a sign up sheet that has lots of options for meeting times: daytimes, evenings, week-ends. You'll be able to indicate your first choice of meeting time, and any other times that you could attend. When our ministers Jennifer and Preston return at the end of the summer, they will create the groups using the information you have provided. They will also choose and train the facilitators. Facilitator training will begin in September, and the groups will begin to meet in October. They will meet until June 2008, twice a month.

Early in the meetings, the groups will have a chance to create a covenant together that will guide their interaction. The covenant deals with specifics such as agreeing to attend or to notify another member if you're unable to attend, and to begin and end on time. It also deals with more subjective issues such as listening, self-monitoring the time that you speak, and agreeing to call members, and to empower the facilitator to call members to the covenant if the need arises.

The format of the meetings is the same each time, with several consistent components: chalice lighting and opening words, naturally, at the beginning, followed by check-in, which can have its own pattern. Then engaging the topic, which will be chosen by the ministers. The value of having all the

groups working with the same topics is that connections among members of different groups then become easier. It's important to emphasize here that the topic serves as a framework, not an end in itself, and this is one aspect of small group ministry that is so different from what we are accustomed to at church. Think of times that members of congregations gather for church, other than Sunday morning worship: café conversations (as we call them), which serve to help us gather information, ask questions about something. Cottage meetings around a specific purpose, again for gathering and sharing information. Committee meetings, which are for getting the work done. Fund-raisers, which are fun and are also work. Busy-ness happens at them. Covenant groups are unique in that even for us, who are so devoted to intellectual and academic excellence, information is not a crucial component of covenant groups. Getting business done is not a component at all. Covenant groups are *relational*, not informational; the whole reason for them is to create and strengthen relationships among a smaller number of members of a larger group.

When this relational energy is burning, two hours passes faster than one might expect, but the group has probably created a covenant in which they agree to begin and end on time. When it's almost time to close, the element that my groups called check-out begins, where members process how the evening's experience has been for them. The final element is the closing words.

Rev. M'ellen Kennedy, one of the coordinators of the UU Small Group Ministry Network, says there are three essential elements for covenant groups:

they must participate in a service project

they must agree together to a set of relational guidelines; that's the covenant I just mentioned and they must be open to new members.

Our groups always leave an empty chair in the circle, to indicate that we know there are people out there who are seeking what we have found, and to remind ourselves that those seekers are always welcome among us.

What can we hope for from small group ministry? We can hope for a stronger church, where new members will find places for themselves quickly, and where older members can relate to others beyond business and committee meetings. We can hope for the joy that comes when we work together to be of service, and the strengthening of spirit that is our reward for valuable service offered with love. We can hope to learn and practice the skill of deep listening, and here again is an aspect of covenant groups that is unique in church. A covenant group is not a discussion group. There's no back and forth, no cross talk, no regular conversational pattern. Every person is invited to speak, and members are encouraged to pay active attention to how often they speak. Have I spoken three times,

and the person across from me has not spoken at all? Then it's time for me to listen for a while. In covenant groups, "listen" is a very active verb. We devote ourselves wholeheartedly to receiving what another person is saying, and there are few times in our lives when we experience the blessing of being so completely listened to. People are changed by that experience. We listen not with the objective of formulating our response, because we don't respond in the standard way. In small groups there is no advice giving, no fixing, no suggestions, no discussions as such. We Unitarian Universalists, who believe that revelation is not sealed, find that God speaks to us in many voices, not just through the words of one sacred text. Sometimes our own truths are made clear to us through the words and experience of our companions. Revelation occurs. And that makes small groups religious as well as relational. Over and over again, I hear participants say, "It feels so wonderful to have people really listening to me."

Once people have experienced this deep listening, both practicing it and being cared for by it, it changes the way we relate in other circumstances. We take the experience into our committee work, and it lets us understand more effectively what others are suggesting, lets us give up the compulsion to figure out how to make others come to our own point of view. We change our focus, so that relationships become more important than business, and we slowly learn that business still gets done beautifully even when relationships take top priority. Of course, some will say that business still gets done beautifully *because* relationships are our top priority. It is a strengthening gift to the larger church community, though, when the skill of deep listening is practiced in any smaller context.

My own hope for small group ministry at Williamsburg UU is that many of you will plunge into it, even without all your questions answered, even if you don't understand what to expect, even if you don't see how it's going to work. Even if, even if. My hope is that you will remember Meg Barnhouse's goat in the back of the pick-up truck, and give up trying to see over the side of the truck. That's not going to help. Don't try to figure out if you're going to a better place with deeper grass, or headed to the slaughterhouse. But I promise you you're not headed to the slaughterhouse. Maybe your alertness is working against you, and what an amazing idea that is. Maybe the greatest wisdom lies in surrendering to the small group ministry process, and not trying to intervene. I invite you all to participate in covenant groups, even if you're not sure what to expect. Maybe we all need to just ask for the wisdom to know when to sit and let our ears flap in the breeze. And so may it be.