

“Intimacy and Ultimacy”

A sermon/dialogue by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
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“...focusing on what someone is saying, learning how to listen.”

“...the spiritual development experience that I’ve longed for...”

“...lets participants tell their stories—there are no opinions or judgments.”

“...about genuine respect and caring for one another.”

“...connects us in close communities of shared thoughts and experiences, and enables us to practice listening and speaking from the heart.”

All are comments of Unitarian Universalists from congregations across the country that have incorporated Small Group Ministry or Covenant Groups into the fabric of their faith communities.

Today we’re launching and, for some of you, re-launching, a form of ministry that invites each of us to fill our well and share the water. What does this mean?

Whenever I ask members and friends of this or any other of our Unitarian Universalist congregations what keeps you coming AND what brought you here in the first place, the heart of the responses is *community*. In heart and mind, we yearn for connection that goes deeper than that to which most of us have become accustomed, deeper than sharing information or crafting agendas or checking off to-do’s on bringing those agendas to fruition or sometimes sparring over a matter that has escalated from a simple disagreement to pulling out all the stops to prove our point. How to build and sustain right here in our midst what Dr. Martin Luther King called *beloved community*? How to reap “the blessings of community” as described by Douglas Taylor and shared by Rev. Rick? Beloved blessed community begins in small groups. Ministry begins in small groups.

Small Group Ministry (SGM) is the intentional gathering of clusters of eight to ten individuals led by trained facilitators supported by a coordinating team. Its purpose? To foster friendship and caring, to enhance spiritual growth, to strengthen the fabric of our faith community, and to provide avenues for service within and beyond this congregation. I’m guessing that you won’t remember this list, so ponder if you will what have been called “the twins” of what Small Group Ministry offers—*intimacy* and *ultimacy*.

Intimacy: connection at a profoundly deep level of meaning and presence in a space that is safe. Intimacy builds with trust. Trust builds with the intentional leadership and nurturing of behavior grounded in covenant. Covenant is the “behavioral glue” of Small Group Ministry. The first order of activity when a small group forms is a behavioral covenant. How will we be together and how can we be assured that we will honor what we agree upon? A behavioral covenant includes matters mundane and dynamic: arrangements (Where will we meet and how frequently?); respect for one another’s time; commitment to attend; sharing “airtime;” general respect; and service. Each element has its own specifics. Behavioral covenants include a uniform core but may vary somewhat from group to group depending on the needs and hopes of you who participate.

Ultimacy: what matters most at the core of life and death. Addressing ultimacy means wrestling with the big questions of who we are, what we’re about, why we’re here, what happens after we die. My late friend and mentor, Forrest Church, described religion as “the human response to being alive and having to die.” Such are the some of the matters wrestled with in the structure and flow of Small Group Ministry.

Small Group Ministry in a primal form has been around since humans have been around. We’re communal animals, however perverse we can be. None of us survives or thrives as a solo act. Small Group Ministry in the context we’re introducing it today happens effectively through a consistent structure of program and process.

As program:

Small group meet twice a month, on a first and third or second and fourth week schedule. Sessions are two hours. Group size is between seven to ten, including the facilitator or co-facilitators. Participants agree to abide by the behavioral covenant. A coordinating team of usually three to four persons oversees the selection, training, and support of facilitators; preparation or choice of session plans—often with input from the groups; and direction of pivotal program changes. How long each group stays together is open ended, though a spring gathering of all participants provides an opportunity for assessment, programmatic changes, and sign-ups for the following year. Participants sign up for a group and commit to participate through the May or June. As for folks wanting to join mid-year or mid-stream, they can be welcomed into any group with an opening—that is, fewer than ten—or a new group can be launched.

As process:

The beauty of Small Group Ministry sessions that so inspires the intimacy and trust I’ve spoken of is a consistent format. A session begins with a chalice lighting and a brief opening reading, and proceeds with a check-in; introduction of the topic; one or two topic-related open questions; responses with no talkback and then dialogue around these questions; a brief time for feedback; introduction of the topic for the next session; and closing words. It’s simple and consistent. Folks come to rely on the consistency AND the skill of facilitators to keep a session on track AND to negotiate special circumstances that inevitably arise in the lives of participants and therefore, the group.

You're perhaps wondering who the lead players are thus far. In mid-September, Rev. Rick, Joanne Edwards, and I met as the Coordinating Team, with Molly Nolan, our Director of Religious Education, joining us *ex officio*. Once we were all on the same page with our vision of Small Group Ministry for this church at this time, we invited folks to serve as facilitators or, more aptly, as co-facilitators, with the intention of having each group led by TWO facilitators. Next Saturday, all who responded positively to our invitation will participate in a full morning of facilitator training. Facilitators agree to meet monthly with our coordinating team both to address issues that have arisen in their groups and to experience their own Small Group Ministry session. You're perhaps wondering who they are! Peg Kirkpatrick and Joe Kiely will work with one adult group. Rev. Rick Klimowicz and a co-facilitator yet to be determined will work with another. And Joanne Edwards and Diane Szymaszek will co-facilitate an intergenerational group to which our senior teens will be invited to participate.

As Rick and Joanne and Molly and I moved through the planning, we became increasingly excited about the promise of how Small Group Ministry can be responsive to what so many of you have expressed a desire for—again, deeper community that happens with growing intimacy and trust and a readiness to wrestle with what matters most, what is ultimate, as we zigzag our way through life.

But why now? We're already doing so much here! So was the congregation in which I worked with the Shared Ministry Committee and UU consultant Peter Bowden to launch what we called Circle Ministry. We planned, we researched best practices in other congregations, we presented it in a worship service as we're doing here this morning, we launched it, we followed through with facilitators who honored the commitment to monthly gatherings, and every spring we enjoyed a potluck of food and perspectives on how it went and what were some desired changes. Then folks signed up for the following year—sometimes in new groups, sometimes in the groups they already knew. It's still going on...with some variations perhaps, but the structure is the same.

Our Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network is a continuing resource to all our congregations launching, sustaining, re-launching, and simply wondering about Small Group Ministry. For the past four years, I've served on the Board of this Network, writing articles, exchanging ideas, and this past summer helping to plan and lead the Small Group Ministry Institute, which Molly participated in along with representatives of congregations across the country. The UU Church in Meriden enjoys membership in this network that increasingly serves not just as a font of resources, but as a catalyst for interchanges among the more than 60% of UU congregations with active Small Group Ministry.

I could go on, in the spirit of excitement that inevitably accompanies deeper commitment to this transformative ministry; but in the spirit of listening and sharing, I'm wondering, Rick and Joanne, what was it about Small Group Ministry that inspired you to commit to your leadership roles?

[Responses]

You've both mentioned how our planning meetings have filled you with increasing excitement about "the launch." Won't you please say more?

[Responses]

And I wonder. Why, when so many folks here already have lives bursting at the seams, would anyone commit to participating in this venture we've described?

[Responses]

Through Small Group Ministry, may we connect with the deeper recesses of our souls. May we connect with each other. May we connect with a world torn and hurting. May we connect with the holy that breathes through each and all in this interconnected web of life of which we are a part. Let's fill our wells and share the water as we experience for ourselves the richness of ministry in small groups.

Amen

Sources:

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