

Unraveling Small Group Ministry and Covenant Groups

Introduction

We know that Small Group Ministry and Covenant Group Ministry are transforming the lives of the people and the congregations that make up our association. Before 1997 there were very few formal Small Group Ministry programs in our congregations. Since then this form of ministry has spread to the majority of our member congregations. It is clear that Small Group Ministries are meeting a number of needs in our congregations. To fully understand the impact to our congregations we must unravel the knot of our Small Group Ministry and Covenant Group Ministry movement.

Cell Groups and Meta-Church

The Rev. Glenn Turner introduced what has become known as Small Group Ministry and Covenant Group Ministry to our association in the late 1990's. Turner had discovered the work of Carl George in his popular books *The Coming Church Revolution* and *Prepare Your Church for the Future*. George advocates doing the ministry and work of the church via small groups (cell groups) and presents a method of mapping out all of the groups, groups functions and leadership needs of a church (Meta-Church analysis). These two concepts are often confused, with Meta-Church incorrectly being used as an alternate label for a small group system.

In his work Carl George upholds the importance of all types and sizes of church groups. A church has many functions, and people have a variety of needs and interests. Therefore, many kinds of groups are necessary. George recognizes this, but also encourages churches to move to a "cell based" model. A cell based church has a church-wide system of small groups as the structural foundation of the community. It is this structure which allows churches to grow and still maintain the intimacy that members seek. To help congregations grow George developed an analytical tool he calls Meta-Church. It is important to note that George's method of Meta-Church analysis is not the same as a small group system. Meta-Church analysis is simply a diagnostic tool for discerning the extent to which a church has been "cellularized." The ideal strives for a diverse system of groups of various size and purpose, as well as the ideal of a faith community based on an integrated system of small groups designed to deepen, expand and share the ministry of the church.

Small Group Ministry and Covenant Groups

After discovering the work of Carl George, the [Rev. Glenn Turner](#) shared "Meta-Church" with the Rev. Calvin Dame and the Rev. Bob Hill, among others. [The Rev. Calvin Dame](#), working with his congregation in Augusta, ME, pursued a church-wide system of small groups (with optional but highly encouraged participation). Groups used session topics prepared by a session writing committee working in collaboration with the minister. As an intentional means for deepening, expanding and sharing the ministry of the church, they settled on the name "Small Group Ministry."

After experiencing great success with this new ministry the congregation in Augusta, ME published a [Small Group Ministry Resource Book](#), sharing their story and offering suggestions on how to implement a similar ministry. Later they began publishing their small group session plans. These resources, coupled with papers by the Rev. Glenn Turner, facilitated the proliferation of this ministry and the term "Small Group Ministry" in our congregations.

[The Rev. Bob Hill](#) took the "good news" of small groups and shared it through his work as one of our District Executives and as editor of the popular e-mail newsletter [Covenant Group News](#), now distributed by the UU Small Group Ministry Network. Through this newsletter and his book, [The Complete Guide to Small Group Ministry](#), Hill popularized the term "Covenant Group" and later "Covenant Group Ministry." In his book Hill promotes Small Group Ministry in all of its forms, devoting an entire chapter to the varieties of Small Group Ministries, including those he classifies as curriculum-directed, minister-directed, theology-directed and interest-directed. What unites these various groups, according to Hill, are six defining characteristics. These are described in detail in Hill's book as well as online (<http://www.smallgroupministry.net/bhill>). Briefly, these elements are: an ideal group size of 8-10, meetings at least monthly, facilitators trained and supported by the ministry team, a covenant, a commitment to service both in the church and larger community, and a standard meeting format (see below). Church groups may use the common format for a small group meeting, but without these additional characteristics a group is not considered, at least by Hill and others, to be a Covenant Group or part of a Small Group Ministry.

Small Group Trends

In our congregations each Small Group Ministry is designed with its own unique culture and character, as are each congregation's worship services. In the same way that our worship services have common elements - hymns, readings, sermons, meditations, and so on - Small Group Ministries in our association have developed a common meeting or session format. This format includes at opening reading, check-in, focus for the session, check-out or group process check, and closing reading. Despite this relatively standard format there exist several larger trends in Small Group Ministry. These relate to the nature and purpose of the larger group system. Note that these trends do not correspond with the popular terms "Small Group Ministry" and "Covenant Group Ministry." These terms have, for better or for worse, been used to refer to any form of small group based program or ministry in our congregations following the popular session format, even when not conforming to all of Hill's defining characteristics.

The descriptions below represent general classes or trends in our Small Group Ministry movement. There is no doubt these ministries will continue to evolve and that there will never be a single way to "do" Small Group Ministry in our association. In exploring these various approaches we may learn from each others' successes, challenges and be inspired to develop a Small Group Ministries that best suit each of our congregations.

Class A: The Church Conceived as a Community of Small Groups

The first class of Small Group Ministries are focused on creating an intentional church-wide small group system with the small group serving as a primary unit of the community. Let's call this Class A. This represents a cultural and structural shift toward what other denominations call the "Cell Church." In these Cell Church inspired Small Group Ministries the underlying vision is to bring people together in all their diversity, organizing the entire faith community in small groups, calling on them to engage in a shared group practice of exploration, reflection and sharing, and mutual care or ministry. These groups tend to use session plans prepared by a minister, session team, or those prepared by other congregations. Sessions focus on a wide variety of subjects, with topic in some cases mirroring the content of a congregation's worship services or sermons. Churches with Class A Small Group Ministries are seeking to become *churches of small groups*. The Augusta, ME congregation is an example of this .

Class B: Diverse Groups Based on Interest, Activity & Affinity

The other primary form of Small Group Ministry is comprised of a diverse set of groups focusing on different activities, interests, needs and other affinities, maximizing the opportunities for involvement, connection, growth and service. These groups offer great programmatic variety while using a standard group format and common policies governing group size, leadership, service and so on. These Small Group Ministries seek to meet the diverse needs and interests of our congregations' members and friends.

Class C: Evolution & Convergence within Standard Model

Though the majority of our congregations appear to have designed and launched Class A and B Small Group Ministries, some small group systems naturally evolve. There are Class A Small Group Ministries that, after some success, are finding that there is a growing desire to be in groups with people who share an affinity toward Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Pagan or other belief traditions. In addition, many congregations are having success with groups for Young Adults, Youth and are using Small Group Ministry as a model for Children's religious education. Some Class B Small Group Ministries include groups that focus on general spiritual exploration and use prepared session plans and are essentially identical in form and function to Class A small groups. This third trend is not so much of a distinct class as a tendency for Class A and B Small Group Ministries, at least in Unitarian Universalist congregations, to take on new dimensions over time. Perhaps one of the greatest features of Small Group Ministry is the potential for bringing together people of various backgrounds and aspirations and to create diverse opportunities for growth and exploration within a single, albeit complex, small group system.

Class D: Other Models and Ministry via Small Groups

There is no right way to accomplish ministry via small groups, though we do see trends and patterns. It is important that we honor the ministry being done via small groups throughout our association. How we use the terms "Small Group Ministry" and "Covenant Group" will most likely be debated for some time. Do alternative models which do not follow the standard format fall into the realm of Small Group Ministry? That which is advantageous in times of threat tends to come from the fringe. As this ministry evolves it is likely that new practices will become popular and our conception of what Small Group Ministry will continue expand.