

Small Group Ministry –The Launch & Four Years Later

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Circle Ministry (CM) describes the SGM that is alive and well at First Parish Unitarian Universalist in Cohasset, MA. Now in its fourth year, we have six groups with 53 participants. In the same way that we count our own age from birth on, we're not counting the "pregnancy year." It was five years ago that the seeds of this ministry were planted through our Shared Ministry Committee (SMC).

Shared Ministry has been the mantra of my ministry since I came here just over five years ago; it follows that our SMC addresses the effectiveness of all the congregation's ministries—professional leadership, religious education, music, social justice, and pastoral care. We're all in it together, and this is our "quality control" body. When I introduced the construct of small group ministry, the initial response was enthusiasm tempered with a desire to know more and to shape something that would work "here." While our Unitarian Universalist congregations have much in common, each takes a certain pride in qualities that set it apart from other UU congregations—a strength and a liability in our extended UU family!

We met early on with Peter Bowden, Small Group Ministry Consultant. Seasoned as Peter is in the multiple forms of SGM, he counseled us well and underscored the importance of the launching process. We took careful notes and engaged in thoughtful discussion. Next came one-on-one interviews between each committee member (minister included) and the ministerial or lay leaders of a select number of other UU congregations with well functioning and long-term small group ministry. Our source for finding these individuals was the Small Group Ministry Network and our minister's knowledge of where SGM had worked well. We devised a common interview format and did the requisite homework.

This "primary research" marked a turning point. After hearing for ourselves what worked, what others would do differently, what difference it made in congregational life, and more, we reconvened with heightened enthusiasm for making this work "here."

Considerable discussion produced the plan for First Parish UU. The key elements on which we all agreed shaped the foundation for Circle Ministry:

- a three-person coordination team that included our minister
- a meeting with the Parish Committee with a sample session and a hoped for vote of confidence from Parish Committee (achieved)
- a Circle Ministry Handbook and Brochure that set forth our vision
- facilitators *invited* and *trained* by our team
- a kick-off Sunday with a sermon from our minister and Peter Bowden, followed by a sample session led by Peter during coffee hour, followed by sign-ups
- a model that used evocative questions around a common theme for said session (vs. affinity groups that use a common theme over time)
- a frequency structure of two sessions per month for each group
- monthly facilitator meetings with our minister
- monthly meetings of CM Coordination team
- behavioral covenants, common to all groups
- a commitment to service projects as part of the behavioral covenants, with one project directed toward the congregation and the other toward the larger community

- a year-end potluck with conversation led by our coordination team around what folks liked, what desired changes we might incorporate, and an opportunity to sign on to a new group, stay in a group or opt out.

Our Circle Ministry Handbook sets forth the vision, the history, and the current structure of SGM here. At its core, it is a covenantal ministry. It only works if we honor the covenant that we make at the outset, a covenant with one another within each group, a covenant among our facilitators, and a covenant with the larger congregation and the community realized through service ventures.

As our Handbook states: We believe that Circle Ministry offers us a path to better realize our mission as a UU congregation and a religious community. This bears out in the comments of participants:

“Before CM, I’ve never been in a group without an authority figure.”

“CM has reconnected me to the church and helped me to be excited about coming to Sunday services.”

“It’s the focus of the CM format that makes the process work. It’s very simple, and that’s the beauty of it.”

Change happens. Adaptation bodes well for vitality, so we continue to tend to the elements of launching that suggest revisiting or revitalizing. We’re also convinced that the nature of the launching was critical for the health of this ministry that continues to thrive.

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