

Reading

The most important questions don't seem to have ready answers. But the questions themselves have a healing power when they are shared. An answer is an invitation to stop thinking about something, to stop wondering. Life has no such stopping places, life is a process whose every event is connected to the moment that just went by. An unanswered question is a fine traveling companion. It sharpens your eye for the road.

Naomi Remen, KITCHEN TABLE WISDOM

Come in to the Circle

A Sermon by Carmen McDowell

UU Church of Whidbey Island, Sunday, March 28, 2004

Good afternoon. Thank you so much for having me here today to talk about something I have been watching grow at East Shore Unitarian Church in Bellevue – small group ministry.

In the reading, physician and author Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen says “The most important questions don't seem to have ready answers. But the questions themselves have a healing power when they are shared. An answer is an invitation to stop thinking about something....”

This reading speaks to me about some of the characteristics of our UU movement that I hold most dear. The idea that questions don't have to be answered, but they need to be shared. The idea that an answer, especially to life's most important questions, is an invitation to stop thinking. I believe life calls us to keep thinking, keep seeking and walking together in faith. In that spirit, here are some queries for us this afternoon.

When do we have opportunities to share life's questions with each other? How do we learn how to “do” community, to listen, to be together with each other in hard times and good? Where are the places that we stretch ourselves and learn to let our masks slip, to be our true and honest and beautiful selves, to dare to observe one another's soft human faces?

I suggest that these are found in community. In UU community. In small groups.

Small group ministry – which we call Covenant Circles at East Shore – is small, intentional groups of 8-10 people who have promised to meet twice a month for a year. The groups are facilitated by a trained volunteer leader, who in turn meets once a month with our senior minister. He creates the Covenant Circle session plans and they follow a set format each time. First, the circle gathers at someone's home or at the church, and then leader calls the group together with a reading and lights the chalice. The group then goes round robin with a brief check-in, followed by another reading and some discussion questions to get the group going. Following the discussion, there's a closing, and the chalice is extinguished. It's been an hour and a half since they gathered, and people are free to go. Sometimes they get together afterward in groups of two or more for coffee.

Why would any congregation want to offer small group ministry? To explore this question, we need to think about what congregations do. They are caring religious communities that, among other things, promote spiritual growth and acceptance of one another. Small group ministry is one way that congregations can do that. They help meet participants' personal needs for uplift and intimacy. They are a place for people experience the church through one another. As I suggested before, it's a place to do community. It's a time twice of month for spiritual discussions – not intellectual, as so many other UU groups or meetings can be.

They also promote growth in a broader sense. In Loren Mead's books about congregational vitality, he presents four types of church growth: **numerical** (growth *of* members); **spiritual** (growth *by* members); **organizational** (growth as a church's reordering of the way it works); and **missional** (growth as a church's enhanced impact on the local community). Covenant Circles promote congregants' inner personal growth, but they also provide a way to numerical growth.

We have noticed at East Shore that small group ministry is a path to membership; sometimes this is through friends inviting friends from outside of church to their Covenant Circle, but more often it is through a deepening of commitment. People who have been part of our community for a dozen years have signed the membership book and taken on leadership roles because their Covenant Circle experience convinced them of the value of membership.

As each Covenant Circle promises to do a service both to the congregation and to the larger community, they have shown us a way to grow our missional commitment.

They have also promoted organizational growth. East Shore currently has 34 Covenant Circle leaders and co-leaders. Through them, our minister has extended his ability to provide pastoral care to the congregation. Along with our pastoral lay ministers, Covenant Circles decrease the spans of care, making them smaller and more reasonable. The congregation is better able to share the ministry, more able to hold each other in care. No doubt this is a challenge for a church of any size.

I've talked a great deal about what Covenant Circles are and what they do. Here's what Covenant Circles aren't:

They aren't social groups, such as friendship groups who gather to catch up with one another, although socializing and checking in is a component of a Covenant Circle.

They aren't therapy groups, though many have found support and emotional grounding comes from the sense of trust and commitment.

They aren't confidential, although every Circle at East Shore has a covenant which holds up the importance of discretion, privacy and good judgment on the part of participants.

They aren't social justice groups, although every group makes a commitment to give something back to the congregation and do an act of service for the larger community each year.

They aren't affinity groups, for they are made up of people who might not have sought each other out and who frankly might be challenged to be in one another's presence, because part of how CC's encourage spiritual growth is by being in community with those who challenge us.

They aren't what my minister calls "college bull sessions," instead, there is a conscious turn-taking facilitated by the Covenant Circle leader who is empowered by the group and the minister to lead the conversations onto spiritual terrain. There is also a commitment to start and end on time.

They aren't cliques, as cliques are limited to a chosen few and have unwritten rules of behavior and participation, rather Covenant Circles are open to all including non-UUs, and expectations are made clear. Newcomers receive a copy of the group's covenant.

They aren't closed groups with a set membership, as a key concept is that someone could come to the group at any time and sit in the "empty chair" and when groups exceed 13-14 participants, they divide into two groups.

The Membership Committee at East Shore heard about small group ministry at General Assembly in 2000. We formed a task force to explore how it might work at our congregation. We had heard many of the things the perhaps you have heard about small group ministry – that it can transform the ministry of the congregation, that it requires a high level of commitment on the part of the participants and this seems to somehow to actually translate to a higher level of commitment across the congregation, that it is an excellent way for newcomers to ease into a church. The Rev. Bob Hill has a book and a website devoted to small group ministry where one can read all about other congregations' experiences through his writings and those of Rev. Calvin Dame, Rev. Thandeka and others. We were excited by these writings yet many of us brought a healthy skepticism to the process.

After the task force met for a year, we drafted a vision statement for small group ministry, wrote a job description for the Covenant Circle leaders, brainstormed a list of people we wanted to be the first leaders of the groups, and set for ourselves the goal of having 5-7 groups with 60 participants. With all that in mind, we recruited and trained 14 leaders in the fall of 2001 with the idea that each group would have a leader and a co-leader. We decided to launch the Circles in January 2002 and our senior minister preached a sermon entitled "Come Into the Circle" the first Sunday of that year and we started signing people up. We were dazzled that actually over 140 people in our congregation of about 600 signed up. Fortunately we had enough leaders and in March 2002, they started meeting for the first time. Today we have about 160 participants in seventeen Circles.

We began to hear stories about how Covenant Circles were touching people's lives. Circles starting volunteering as groups to give something back to the community – they hosted coffee hour and walked in AIDS walks together.

Once a newcomer to East Shore just walked into a Circle that was meeting at the church and sat in the empty chair. She really didn't know what she was walking into, but she was low and wanted a place to be with other UUs. We spoke later that week and she told me that she had grown up in Unitarian churches but she had never experienced such a feeling of welcome and caring as she had from that group of people that night. She never knew UUs were capable of this.

One Covenant Circle participant got a call from her mother's doctor informing her that mother was losing her battle with cancer, and that she should come to be with her before the end. She booked her plane reservation to leave after her Covenant Circle meeting that evening because she knew she couldn't face losing her mother without going to her Circle first.

These are just a few of many, many stories. You might be thinking, all that sounds good – what does it take to really do small group ministry at a congregation? I think it takes a commitment from the minister and the Board. It takes people who are committed to being leaders, two for each Circle. It takes coordination -- someone has to keep track of who's in each Circle and help with placements of newcomers and so on. It takes time to either develop session plans or sift through the session plans and other resources that are out there in the UU community. It takes energy and effort for the person who coordinates small group ministry to meet regularly with the leaders and constantly renew their sense of vision, work with them to sharpen their skills, and lift them up in their efforts. In our congregation, the Senior Minister and I devote part of our time to the work of Covenant Circles.

So that's really it in a nutshell. Small – meaning groups of 8-10 people, Group – meaning connected up twice a month, showing up and sharing, Ministry – meaning creating reasonable spans of care and giving people the opportunity to conduct their own free and responsible search for truth and meaning. This is Covenant Circles.

Bill Sinkford says “We live in a world of hurt -- and we have a healing message. It is our job to make this healing voice heard far and wide.” I believe Covenant Circles help us do that.

Our **Closing Words** are from Kathleen McTigue:

May the light around us guide our footsteps and hold us fast to the best and most noble vision that we seek. May the darkness around us nurture our dreams and give us rest so that we may give ourselves to the work of the world. Let us seek to remember the wholeness of our lives, the weaving of light and shadow in this great and astonishing dance we call life.