



Celebrating Small Group Ministry

A Sunday Event at Dublin Street United Church, Guelph

May 2008 Issue Contents

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Margaret Swain

Reading the Bible Again

by Margaret Swain

I'm relatively new to Dublin St. United. I took part in a small ministry group which met for ten sessions and was facilitated by Rev. Sue Campbell and Stan Bunston. We read Marcus Borg's *Reading the Bible again for the First Time*. Each week we covered one chapter. We viewed the DVD which is a companion to the book, and we worked with a Participant's Booklet that included discussion questions. One week we had an interesting re-enactment of a passage from Acts.

Rev. John Lawson preached a sermon early last fall about reading your bible. I was already doing that each day, but I was struggling with the message that was hidden in what I was reading. I thought this course might help me to better understand my bible. It completely changed the way I now read it and the interpretation I put upon it. It also exposed me to something I had not run across before, a history of what was happening at the time of the events that are depicted in the various books of the Old and New Testaments.

I have taken courses and attended lectures over the years and this was one of the best sessions I have encountered. I looked forward to each weekly meeting. I knew that was the one time during the week when things would slow down. I could wrap my brain around that day's topic, delve into it in depth and participate in a way you can't with a lecture or in a large group.

We started out with nine people, and ended with six, including Sue and Stan. There was an intimacy that developed within our small group ministry, and from that intimacy came a sense of

reassurance and comfort. We became familiar with each other and developed a trust, which enabled us to express our thoughts without any fears of disapproval or rejection. During those sessions I grew to admire, respect and appreciate the members of the group and the views they brought to it.

So what did I gain from the experience of a small group ministry? Well, it was the first book I have read by Marcus Borg, but it won't be my last. I had hoped to get a better insight into my daily sessions with the bible. Did I? Oh yes! I know I have much further to go to understand its message, but I now feel I am on the right path. One of the most important things I gained from the group – and one which I hadn't anticipated – was five new friends. That, as a newcomer to a congregation, is priceless.

Small Groups

by Susan van Acker

From the time I was young I have been involved in church life. I have attended Sunday school, taught Sunday school, was an active Youth Group member, went to retreats at Five Oaks, belonged to various choirs, etc. The church community has always been important for me, so when I move to a new place I inevitably find myself searching for a church. I like the traditions, I like the music, I like the smell of churches – but to pinpoint what specifically draws me would be very hard.

When our family first moved to Winnipeg I looked for a church that would be a good fit for us. On my first Sunday at Fort Garry United the minister talked about a small group that was starting. It would meet every week for 34 weeks to



Susan van Acker



Joyce Madsen

completely read the bible. I had no real interest in reading the bible but I was new to the community; I wanted to make new friends, so I signed up.

When I walked into our first meeting I thought I had made a mistake. With the exception of one couple in their mid-50s everyone else in the room was a senior. I was 29. How could I have anything in common with these people? I was near to the beginning of my career, I had a baby at home. They had grandchildren. I knew very little about the bible. Surely they were all experts!

Our group, known as Disciple, were 12 strong including our 2 facilitators. We didn't actually read the bible cover to cover but we did read over 70% of it (if we did our homework). What I came to realize over the next 34 weeks was that Disciple wasn't about reading the whole bible. Also, it didn't matter what our ages were. We used the scripture readings each week as a source of reflection and a springboard for discussion. We all brought pieces of ourselves to the table and came away richer for the experience.

In all of my years as a member of the United Church I had never experienced anything like this. This was a new kind of community. This was spiritual community. We talked freely, argued, and discussed our beliefs. We acknowledged that sometimes we couldn't make up our minds about a given issue. This is stuff that rarely happens at coffee time on Sunday morning. It was intentional and often unpredictable.

Small group ministry expanded my spirituality in ways that no other ministry could have and it built for me a community that I would not have otherwise had (and may not have typically sought), but a community I needed and am thankful for.

would mean for me. We went to Millwoods United Church. Millwoods was brand new and they had just called Rev. Bill Beach to be their minister.

Bill recognized that it took all kinds of leaders to create a foundation upon which to build a congregation. He established a Kerygma class. A group of us began to meet every Monday night, and we met for three years. There were nine of us that carried it through, and it was for me a life-changing experience.

Millwoods United did not have a church building at that time, so we met in homes. We shared what was happening in our lives each week, and had a time of learning. That began what has become a number of long term relationships. I still consider Pat Bourque one of my good friends. She went on to become a staff person for Edmonton Presbytery, and now for the Conference. Rob and Jennifer McPhee had two little girls like me. In that group we shared a lot of life, including marriages that were breaking up and celebrations.

I went on from being in the Kerygma group to chairing a congregation. Bill mentored me into taking courses. Then I met Clair Woodbury which led to researching church development and now consulting. It has all been an opportunity to learn and grow in a way I would never in my wildest dreams would have thought was possible.

That Kerygma group was about loving and sharing and growing. I think that is what Jesus had in mind when he trained the disciples and sent them out. Being in a small group is an opportunity I would encourage everyone to take advantage of.

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Kerygma Study Group

by Joyce Madsen

The story I want to share goes back to 1974. I had just come back to Edmonton as a single parent with three kids in tow. They needed to get to church and develop some understanding of what Christianity was all about. I did not know what that



Additional session added for our Small Group Ministry Training Event

Athabasca 2008

Register today — we only accept a maximum of eight people. Our first session August 11—14 is full, but we have added a second session August 18 – 21. Here is what people say about the experience of participating in a small group in their congregation:



- ◆ One of the most important things I gained from the group — and one which I hadn't anticipated — was five new friends. That, as a newcomer to a congregation, is priceless.
- ◆ Small group ministry expanded my spirituality in ways that no other ministry could have and it built for me a community that I would not have otherwise had.
- ◆ Being in a small group is an opportunity I would encourage everyone to take advantage of.

For more information phone

Clair at 780-619-0386 or Joyce at 780-438-6016

Presence

James Strachan

If we read the gospels closely, we see that many of Jesus' teaching moments grew out of an occasion when he listened to people, heard their story, and just spent time with them. The story of the rich young man comes to mind (Luke 18:18-23), or the conversation with the woman at the well (John 4:7-23). The Way Jesus taught is not so much a way of talking, or proclaiming, but rather of "being with" people, listening to them, accepting their story with an open heart before any significant speaking takes place.

Too many of us in full-time ministry become accustomed to talking to people, so we forget that just being with them, listening to them, is the most powerful ministry of all. Robert V. Thompson, in his book *A Voluptuous God: a Christian Heretic Speaks*, reminds us that:

The power of being present is the greatest power we human beings possess. What matters most is not what we say. It is not what we believe or think we know. It is not speaking the right words or offering blessed assurance. What matters most is our capacity to be present with what is, and our simple entering and sharing the mysterious and ambiguous silence.

I would encourage you to explore your own recollection of comforting moments. My guess is that they will involve visions of painful moments when

someone — anyone — would just hold you and listen to you. Many times that will have been a mother who was the "minister." It might have been a favourite teacher, or the closest of friends. But the moment of cherished memory will likely involve someone who could enter your world and sit there, quietly, and take it all in.

I worked for 32 years as a Hospital Chaplain, Pastoral Educator, and Family therapist, and in all that time, the most useful thing I did in many situations was be present to another's distress. Can you imagine there is anything helpful or comforting to say when a baby is dying and the parents are sobbing beside the incubator? Or when someone has just discovered that their partner is deeply involved in an affair with another person, thus shattering the dream of a life-long marriage. Is there something you might say that would ease that pain?

Each of us has all the training and experience we need to be present to a friend in pain, or sorrow, or a time of loss. There's an old Quaker saying, "If you can't improve on the silence, then don't speak." There are always people who need someone to be with them, truly "with" them in those times. My guess is that person could be you.

James Strachan is a "retired" United Church minister who lives in Ponoka and serves Bashaw part-time.



A crisis of purpose

by Christopher White

Between 1994 and 2004, Canada's population increased by almost three million people. During that same time period, The United Church of Canada closed 433 preaching places and opened only nine. To describe this as dismal is to put only the most positive of spins on what is a full-fledged organizational disaster. Cracks are appearing all around us – staff layoffs, reductions in mission support grants, last-minute pleas to support the Mission and Service Fund.

At the dawn of the 21st century, our denomination is stumbling about in the dark. The future choices we face are clear: continuing decay and decline, or a daring reformation of our denomination. The crisis we are facing is, at its heart, a crisis of purpose. Until we address this central issue, nothing we do has a chance of working.

I believe passionately in the transformative power of the local congregation. Even with all its problems, it is such a precious gift to be part of a worshipping congregation in our denomination. Yet church is hard and it's going to get harder; but God does not call us to easy things. So let me make three suggestions.

First, we should follow upon the work of our past moderator Very Rev. Peter Short and enter an intentional period of national discernment. This discernment should be located in congregations and all courts of the church. The questions are deceptively simple: What is God calling us to be and what does that need to look like in the 21st century? The answers may be complex, but we will discover a shape and unifying texture that draws us together.

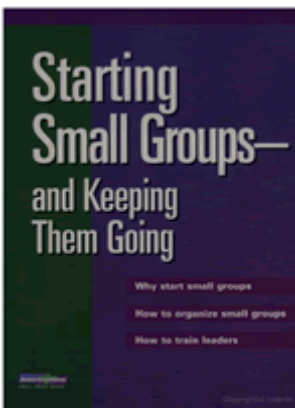
The second idea comes from a member of my congregation. I believe it is consistent with the recent pastoral letter from the current moderator, Rt. Rev. David Giuliano. We should hire a consultant to inventory every church and

piece of property owned by the United Church. With that should come recommendations about what churches should be maintained, closed, merged, redeveloped or developed as commercial properties to fund the ongoing work of the church, or simply given away to local communities. In addition, we should identify places in need of ministry and then vigorously launch new ministries in these areas, with appropriate funding mechanisms and specific targets and measurements for effectiveness and accountability.

Finally, we need to revisit our structure and governance. Our current structure is based upon a world that has not existed for a very long time. It is killing us and has turned us into managers and away from focusing on our mission. We should reconvene a task group on governance and structural change and develop a system that is lean, effective and faithful and that feeds the mission of the church. Everything we do needs to come out of the renewed vision, purpose and mission. Our decisions, our ministry, our very theology need to emerge out of a newly defined vocation.

In poker, there is a time when you put all your chips on the table and go for it. It is time for us to go all out. The alternative is a continued decline into irrelevancy, and that I believe would be faithless to God, our history and a terrible loss to our nation and the future generations who will need our particular and unique Christian voice.

Rev. Christopher White is a minister at Westminster United in Whitby, Ontario. Reprinted from the United Church Observer with permission.



Starting Small Groups and Keeping them Going

This book comes out of the Lutheran church, and has a wealth of practical suggestions. It deals extensively with what it takes to organize small groups in your church, then goes on to deal with training small group facilitators.

The book is jam packed with practical suggestions. There are a number of agendas outlined for small group meetings. There are forms you can photocopy and use right away. There are diagrams that help make concepts clear.

The Part 3 "Training Small Group Facilitators" is very

comprehensive. They advise building meetings around principles like:

- ◆ Facilitators have experiences to share and will learn from each other.
- ◆ Facilitators have problems and questions they need to ask.
- ◆ Facilitators need continued skill training. Not everything gets covered in initial training.

The authors cover things like covenants, the life cycle of a small group, why small groups need to remain small, etc. A session by session training manual is included.

The 8 1/2 X 11 inch format makes this an easy book to find your way around. We recommend it to any congregation doing small groups.

George S. Johnson et al., *Starting Small Groups—and Keeping Them Going*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005. ISBN 0-8066-0125-6. \$26.