

Implementing Small Group Social Change Ministry

*"If you have come here to help me, you are wasting our time.
But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."
-Aboriginal activists group, Queensland, 1970s*

Why Small Group Ministry for Social Change?

As Unitarian Universalists, our faith calls us to be agents for social change. However, sometimes this work can feel draining, daunting, or disconnected from our spirituality. Engaging social change efforts through the format of small group ministry addresses both the yearning to grow spiritually in community and the call to transform ourselves and the world. The Small Group Ministry becomes our home base, from which we engage with the world, walk beside our partners in the community, and return to reflect, recharge, and renew our commitments. Using this format encourages us to focus more on spiritual and social transformation and less on tasks, campaigns, and the roller coaster of political wins and losses. Our Small Group Ministries are places we can take risks, make mistakes, learn together, and deepen our engagement of social change, spiritual growth, and the connections between the two. Small Group Social Change Ministry asks us to take the time to reflect on how we are connected to that which is larger than ourselves and how that connection transforms us and calls us to walk beside our partners as we endeavor to create the Beloved Community.

What is Small Group Ministry for Social Change?

- Focused on one social justice issue alive in the congregation and community
- Group is not closed, but members are committed to the issue and the group itself
- Group develops partnerships with faith-based or other non-profits doing the work of your chosen focus. Partner with them to establish active engagement in the community and build relationships with the people affected by the issue.
- Justice work is done as "accompanying".

Tenets of Accompanying for Social Change

1. Being in communion with traditionally marginalized people (showing up), and staying in the relationships for the long haul.
2. Remembering that the liberation of everyone and everything is inherently connected, and together, we are on a learning journey toward it
3. Walking together as equals with marginalized people while navigating differences in a loving, respectful, trusting relationship.
4. Struggling together; encouraging one another's spiritual growth
5. Contemplating the gifts you are going to receive when accompanying, instead of how you will give, help, teach, tell, or fix
6. Unlearning patterns of dominance, like taking charge, leading, making decisions, etc.
7. Asking for and lending empathic support
8. Moving beyond asking to acting
9. Getting out of your comfort zone (materially, emotionally, and physically)
10. Disrupting the systems and structures of oppression – with integrity and in authentic community with those directly impacted, following their leadership

*The Latin roots of “accompanying” are:
to be together (“com”) in eating bread (“panis”), face to face.*

Derived from academic and pastoral care resource on the topic along with interviews by Kelly Dignan with Dr. Vincent Harding, Staughton Lynd, Rev. John Fife, Rev. Dr. Thandeka, Rev. Julie Todd, PhD, and companions in creating Beloved Community.

How to Run Ministry Group Meetings:

1. Agenda for Meetings

- First hour:
 - Read Group Covenant Aloud
 - Chalice Lighting (2 minutes) – One person brings words for this and Closing Words
 - Spiritual Practice (13 minutes) – Another person brings a Spiritual Practice or selected "third thing" for the group to engage together.
 - Sharing an Experience (20 minutes) – Another person shares an experience
 - Group Reflection (25 minutes)
- Second hour:
 - Business (Next steps for this learning community based on shared intention)
 - Closing Words and Extinguishing the Chalice

2. Roles

- One person facilitates group process
- One person brings chalice lighting and closing words
- One person brings spiritual practice to share
- One prepares an experience to share
- One person could be process observer - keeping time, reminding people to use “I” statements and stick with the topics at hand
- One person maintaining relationship with clustered UU congregations practicing Small Group Social Change Ministry

3. Spiritual Practices (in addition to reading aloud the group's covenant)

Practices (singing, art, journaling, intercultural skills, etc) are spiritual practices if done with intention to become more present and attentive; return to my higher self - which is inherently sacred; connect with something larger than ourselves; develop empathy and compassion for oneself and others. Spiritual practices shared in group also include use of a "third thing" such as a selected text or video clip employed as tool for open reflection in the first half of the meeting.

4. Template for Shared Experience

Name:	Date:
<p>Experience: Share an experience related to the issue of focus for your small group social change ministry that created an emotional shift in you and made you feel connected to something larger than yourself.</p> <p>Describe the concrete events.</p> <p>How did you accompany the people involved (Refer to <i>Tenets of Accompanying</i>)?</p> <p>Describe your feelings in that moment. (The emotional shift may have resulted in feeling that drag you down or lift you up.)</p> <p>Now that you have paused to reflect, use the language of your liberal faith to describe how you felt connected to something larger than yourself.</p> <p>Describe how this feeling of connection helps sustain you.</p> <p>How might it impact your social change work?</p>	
<p>Group Reflection: After deep listening and a time of silence, group members now have a chance to reflect on the event (if you attended) or the story as it has been told. Be sure to use “I” statements.</p> <p>Describe your feelings about the experience just shared.</p> <p>Share what you learned about accompanying.</p> <p>Now that you have paused to reflect, use the language of your liberal faith, describe how hearing about this experience helps you feel connected to something larger than yourself.</p> <p>Describe how this feeling of connection helps sustain you.</p> <p>How might it impact your group’s social change work? As an intentional learning community, what do you want to learn more about?</p>	

The "third thing" in Small Group Social Change Ministry

Excerpted from *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life* by Parker Palmer

This volume by Parker Palmer explores the meaning of community, teaching and learning for transformation, and the importance of nonviolent social change. Here is an excerpt on the spiritual practice of sharing your story in a circle of trust.

In Western culture, we often seek truth through confrontation. But our headstrong ways of charging at truth scare the shy soul away. If soul truth is to be spoken and heard, it must be approached 'on the slant.' I do not mean we should be coy, speaking evasively about subjects that make us uncomfortable, which weakens us and our relationships. But soul truth is so powerful that we must allow ourselves to approach it, and it to approach us, indirectly. We must invite, not command, the soul to speak. We must allow, not force, ourselves to listen.

We achieve *intentionality* in a circle of trust by focusing on an important topic. We achieve *indirection* by exploring that topic metaphorically, via a poem, a story, a piece of music, or a work of art that embodies it. **I call these embodiments 'third things'** because they represent neither the voice of the facilitator nor the voice of a participant. They have voices of their own, voices that tell the truth about a topic but, in the manner of metaphors, tell it on the slant. Mediated by a third thing, truth can emerge from, and return to, our awareness at whatever pace and depth we are able to handle — sometimes inwardly in silence, sometimes aloud in community — giving the shy soul the protective cover it needs.

Rightly used, a third thing functions a bit like the old Rorschach inkblot test, evoking from us whatever the soul wants us to attend to. Mediated by a good metaphor, the soul is more likely than usual to have something to say. But the fact will count for nothing if we fail to recognize that the soul is speaking or fail to pay attention to what it says.

Conversations in which we speak and hear truth on the slant are always at risk because they defy conventional norms. As we explore a May Sarton poem, for example, we may discover (as I once did) that a member of the group did his doctoral dissertation on Sarton. After listening to people talk about the poem for a while, he proclaimed, "What you have been saying is *not* what Sarton had in mind!" Instantly, the circle became unsafe and this 'expert' tried to dominate it with 'objective' knowledge, intimidating people who had been speaking from their hearts.

In such a moment, the facilitator must move gently — but quickly and firmly — to make everyone feel safe again, including, if possible, the person who made things unsafe. I recall saying something along these lines: 'What Sarton had in mind is certainly an interesting topic, but it is not our topic here. Our focus is on how this poem intersects our own lives and evokes our own experience. I invited all of you to speak about the poem in that spirit, and I invite you to continue to do so.'

But keeping the circle open to subjective viewpoints does not mean that 'anything goes,' another way of saying that we must be intentional as well as invitational. A third thing, in the hands of a good facilitator, provides the boundaries that can help keep our exploration in that creative space between aimless meandering and a forced march toward some predetermined goal.