

**Engagement
Groups:
Bringing Forth
the Future
from the Past**

By Thandeka

THE 2002 ESSEX HALL LECTURE

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Small Group Ministries are transforming the religious landscape of Unitarian Universalism in the United States. Known as Covenant Groups, Chalice Circles, or Shared Ministry Groups, these groups are revitalizing the spiritual life of our congregations. Engagement Groups, as they are to be called in Britain, have the power to similarly revitalize Unitarian and Free Christian churches here.

The name "Engagement Groups" is particularly apt. These groups provide an avenue for engagement not only with a small group of individuals, but also with the congregation of which the small group is a part, and with the larger community. Ministers of Unitarian Universalist churches in the States report that as a result of Small Group Ministries, membership increases, lay participation expands, pastoral care teams develop, and congregational commitment to the overall mission of the church deepens.

Small Group Ministries recall the original meaning of liturgy [from the Greek *leit-ourgia*] as "the work of the people". As a movement of, by, and for the people, Small Group Ministries produce communities within communities, churches within churches. Churches grow because the primary product of this work of the people is the people themselves.¹ The members of these groups are transformed by the small group practices they enact.² They become what they practise: an inclusive, beloved community of God.

Small Group Ministries thus affirm the insight of Yale University liturgy professor Aidan Kavanagh when he describes liturgies: "What they produce, among other things, is ourselves."³ As Kavanagh rightly notes, "The worshipping assembly never comes away from such an experience unchanged, and the assembly's continuing adjustment to the change is not merely a theological datum but theology itself."⁴ It is an account of an experience with God. Our own theology as free religionists also

begins as a living fact, an act of right relationship, a creation of ourselves anew. We preach what we practise: right relationship. From this practice flows a faith that is our assurance of things hoped for, our conviction of things not seen.⁵

Engagement Groups, as “the people’s work”, will put into practice a liturgical theology that is essential to the tradition from which Unitarian and Free Christian churches of Great Britain have developed: rational dissent, religious tolerance, and piety. No one knew the power of this particular form of liturgical practice better than master liturgist and editor James Martineau, who called for a strategy of “rigorous restraint” when attending to the liturgical life of public worship.⁶ Martineau knew the restraints he must practise as editor as he harmonized liturgical practices “with the wants of growing churches”.⁷ His measured restraint brought about a structural shift in nineteenth-century Unitarianism. Today, the structure of Engagement Groups can bring about another shift in religious life because it grows churches.

The Structure of Engagement Groups

The structure of this contemporary way of “growing churches” is simple. Groups of six to twelve persons gather, often based on a common interest, affinity, or activity, and agree to meet together on an ongoing basis. They meet for two hours, once or twice a month, in each other’s homes or at church. Each group is led by a facilitator whose primary function is to keep the group focused, thus helping ensure that the group accomplishes its own purpose.

Each session begins and ends with a ritual that affirms the members’ spiritual life as part of a beloved community. Then, each person has the opportunity to speak about what’s going on in her or his life. Meeting content is based on the group’s collective decision: experiencing, learning, discussion, planning, action, and reflection around the group’s chosen focus. Work on the mutually agreed-upon topic might include discussion of a novel, conversation about child-rearing practices, study of theology, or investigation of a religious text. Each meeting ends as it

began, with a ritual that affirms the religious sentiments and feelings of the group.

Several times a year, all the members of the group work together on a project in service to their larger community. The members of the group thus have multiple ways to build strong relationships with each other and with the larger congregation of which their small group is a part. This ongoing process of engagement is the content of a liturgical act. The process alters dispositions, shifts feelings, and produces religious affections, and pious feelings as acts of grace-filled sentiment. These feelings alter our way of acting in the world and produce compassionate action. From them flow the ethics of religious practice: good works. This form of faith is, as Aidan Kavanagh rightly observes, “a regular, ongoing process of experience, memory, reflection, and reappropriation carried out by real people in always changing circumstances which affect the process and are affected by it. This is how the assembly constructs its own story, its history, and in the construction constantly rediscovers and constitutes itself under grace for the life of the world.”⁸

The Power of Engagement Groups

The source of this power is reverential engagement. This engagement is the point where different persons, divergent beliefs, and dissonant claims meet. These awesome experiences of human engagement create an ethos of trust and safety among the participants. Some individuals learn how to sustain interior work without becoming depleted. Others learn how to share in public accounts of individual experiences, without being drained of energy. People of all ages and from varying backgrounds come together and create community. From these encounters, a liturgy of personal reflection and public expression is born. Small Group Ministries create the space for contrapuntal movements of human engagement and differentiation. Jewish philosopher Martin Buber describes such encounters as the place between “I” and “Thou” where the healing presence of God is felt.⁹ Twentieth-century American Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams affirms this sacred place, reminding us that we are associating beings.¹⁰

We create and are created by our associations. Every moment of our lives, we actively bring together disparate sensations; we link personal feelings to mental expectations and reflections; we think of others and how they have shaped our lives and how they have helped determine our very way of being in the world. We are formed and shaped by the company we keep, the communities in which we live. We display the customs and social patterns of our associations. The very structure of the self is built up, defined, and maintained through relationships with other persons. We are the creative expressions of the families, friends, colleagues, and other persons who collectively help determine the story of our lives.

Small Group Ministries are liturgies for relating interdependently. Small Group Ministries are “the people’s work” for creating, sustaining, and transforming our selves, each other, and our world. The practices and procedures are informed by the premise that the foundation of religious experience begins with human affection, the primordial power that emerges whenever two or more people meet together and listen compassionately and equitably to each other. The liturgical work of creating community together enables each member of the group to feel that he or she is astir with creation. It is practical theology writ small.

Jesus refers to the power of Small Group Ministries when he says, “Where two or more are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”¹¹ For liberal Christians, Jesus is there as an affirmation of the sacred nature of our humanity, the beloved community that can regenerate the broken-hearted. In sum, the entire process entails religious ritual, engaged listening, compassionate speaking, and rational critique, and as such, is “dynamic, critical, reflective, and sustained”. Each meeting is thus a liturgical act, a work of the people, and as such, is “an act of theology”.¹²

The power of Small Group Ministries is theological. It is an account of a sacred encounter, an affirmation of what goes on between persons when the engagement is filled with grace. Testimonials affirm this fact. The Rev. Calvin Dame of Augusta, Maine, board member of the Unitarian

Universalist Association and a leader in the Small Group Ministry movement in the United States, offers comments from congregants who have participated in his church’s Small Group Ministry programme.

- Small Group Ministry is the spiritual development group that I’ve been hoping to find for a long time.
- Small Group Ministry has re-connected me to the church community.
- Small Group Ministry has helped me to be excited about going to church.
- Small Group Ministry helps me build personal relationships.¹³

The theological power of this movement is affirmed by the Rev. Bob Hill, District Executive for the Southwest Conference of the UUA, who edits a free e-mail newsletter called *Covenant Group News*: “I am hopeful for our Association now as I have not been before in more than thirty years of ministry, because our congregations are adopting this shared ministry approach and, by doing so, they are finally serving well the two primary needs people bring with them through our front doors: the need for having their horizons lifted above the mundane, materialistic focus of daily life on the one hand and, on the other, the need for community, for friendships.”¹⁴

I first became aware of the power of Small Group Ministry as “the people’s work” when I attended a workshop led by Bob Hill three years ago at the Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly. More than one hundred persons attended the workshop. Members of the audience stood to give personal testimonials about the power of Small Group Ministries in their congregations. Ministers and laity spoke of the ways in which their personal lives and the life of their churches had been transformed by this work. One member of the audience described Small Group Ministry as a “grassroots movement”. The fact that this movement was spontaneous and largely unorganized became evident in

that most of those present at the workshop did not seem to know that other congregations had been engaged in the same work.

In order to begin the process of sharing resources on Small Group Ministry, I passed around a sheet of paper to gather names and addresses of the workshop attendees. Thus did I begin my work with Bob Hill and other leaders of Small Group Ministries to transform these spontaneous eruptions of small group work into a global movement. The Center for the Community Values (www.the-ccv.org), a not-for-profit educational institute, now serves as a resource centre and networking co-ordinator for people engaged in Small Group Ministries, providing trainers, producing written material, presenting workshops, and organizing conferences to advance this movement.

Unitarian Universalists in the States did not invent this contemporary way of “doing church”. We have simply found ways to make it fit the particular needs of our diverse Unitarian Universalist congregations. The roots take us back to the foundation of our faith. Here we find a primal affirmation of the power of Small Group Ministry.

The History of Engagement Groups

The Christian history of Small Group Ministry as “the people’s work” began with the house churches of primitive Christianity. Wherever two or more persons gathered together in the name of Christ, there was the church, *ecclesia*, a gathering together of God’s people as both a personal and a communal response to God’s action in their lives through Christ and the Holy Spirit. The church thus meant a covenantal community, rather than a building. It was the work of a people gathered together in the name of God. As such, the *Ecclesia* referred to an assembly, a people gathered together in worshipful stewardship empowered by God. Each meeting was the act of a covenantal community.¹⁵ The power of this act was God. The product of this act was the creation of a beloved community. Each meeting was thus the human expression of a collective and personal encounter with God.¹⁶ The expression of the human sentiment produced by this encounter was piety: religious affections, the

feeling of having been touched and thus altered by God. The encounter, rather than the building in which the encounter took place, was sacred.

The Rev. Bob Hill makes this point in his article entitled *A Brief History: The Roots of Covenant Groups*. It can be argued “that Christianity had its infancy in small-group organization and lost a source of vitality when, in the third century, church buildings began to be put up. Until then, Christians had met almost exclusively in small groups in homes.”¹⁷

In the seventeenth century, Philip Jacob Spener brought Western Christianity back to small group ministries. He began the pietistic movement in Germany to revitalize the human experience of the power of divine encounter with God. To this end, Spener emphasized “*ecclesiolae in ecclesia* (little churches within the church) to promote a revival of practical and devout Christianity”.¹⁸ He focused on small groups, “little churches within the church” to revitalize the pious feelings of Protestants.¹⁹

In the eighteenth century, in Europe and America, these small groups were called ‘tropes’, formed by Brethren in various denominations so that the diversity of belief within Protestantism could be safeguarded and assured. Thus were there Lutheran, Reformed, and Moravian tropes. All of the tropes, we are told by Jacob John Sessler in his book *Communal Pietism Among Early American Moravians*, could be bound together by their spiritual ties rather than by their discrete creedal claims.²⁰

Today in the States, many large evangelical Christian churches use Small Group Ministry as a vehicle for evangelism and member assimilation. The guru of evangelical Christian Small Group Ministries is Carl George, who, in a chapter entitled “You Serve a Power God” in his book, *Nine Keys to Effective Small Group Leadership*, explains the power of Small Group Ministry in Trinitarian terms:

When Christians come together in the name of the Lord Jesus, there is a special sense of His presence—a sacrament of sorts in

the sense of outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual graces.... Beautiful expressions of the Holy Spirit also take place as a person with one set of spiritual gifts interacts with those who have received other gifts.²¹

George's orthodox Christian perspective is firmly rooted in biblical precedent: Exodus 18:12-37. In this passage, Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, tells Moses, "The work is too heavy for you, you cannot handle it alone." George refers to this biblical passage to explain why Moses must organize the tribes of Israel into "small groups", thus establishing "a new precedent in Israel's law".²² This precedent carries forward as a rationale for Christian practice. George's biblically based conviction is that "the Holy Spirit officially commissions every believer into a ministry of caring for one another".²³

James Martineau and the Piety of Engagement Groups

My own theological explanation of the power of Small Group Ministries begins with the human response to a sacred encounter. I begin with the work of the people. I follow a rationale congenial to free religionists and consistent with the insights of master liturgist James Martineau. Martineau knew a great deal about the power of piety as a liturgical act and described the feelings elegantly in his preface to the 1874 edition of *Hymns of Prayer and Praise*:

The deeper the sense of spiritual realities, the more do we live in a present that is divine; and faith so far dispenses with the past as rather to invest it with sanctity that wait for its witness and consecration. The habitual "walk with God", hour by hour, the leaning on him in weakness, the drawing from him of strength, the conscious passing of a warm light or a chill shadow, according as he is remembered or forgotten, supersede by immediate experience the secondary attestations of divine things, and leave all scripture sacred simply by consent of sympathy and reverence. Such inward self-surrender is the true fulfilment of the Christian aim of life....²⁴

For Martineau, these deep experiences of spirituality produced an inward experience of self-surrender that transformed the participants individually and collectively when they gathered together as an act of worship.

Chief among Martineau's insights was the affirmation of liturgical change as a fact of the communal life of Dissenters. Protest over creeds divides Christians, Martineau noted, but the longing for worship unites them.²⁵ The breadth and depth of this longing gave Martineau, as liturgist, permission to compile liturgies from the devotional writings of every Christian age, in an effort to honour the common spirit of Christian sentiment:

The gradual expansion of the original sources of Christian conception to embrace the new thought and larger sentiment which they themselves have been instrumental in creating, is the natural method of evolving the future from the past; and, in comparison with it, every religion of broken allegiance and private initiative, however adequate for the lives of individuals, will prove ineffective for the union of hearts and the work of a true Church.²⁶

Martineau recognized the power of liturgy to transform those who practise it. He found revitalizing innovations in the midst of the old liturgical practices. As a hymn-book editor, Martineau could thus remind congregants of the necessity for change as part of their liturgical tradition:

If the original texts were all stereotyped, while new impulses awoke and new thoughts were born and worship began to speak in tones unheard before, the whole continuity and Catholicity of religious life would be broken; the old inheritance of sacred influence would be struck with paralysis; a fresh library of piety, a separate school of spiritual culture, would be set up for every little community; and for the grave and lofty speech of a universal devotion, we should have a grotesque assemblage of provincial eccentricities. The whole hope of any gathering

together of Christians in a comprehensive “City of God” depends on a gradual falling away of transitory from permanent elements in the *sacra* transmitted from the past: and they can never be sifted out, and lay bare the imperishable residuum, unless each communion is free to take what it can from the life of the rest, and so test the real range of possible sympathy.²⁷

Innovation in the Midst of Tradition

Martineau knew that innovation appears in the midst of tradition. The history of British Dissent was testimony to this liturgical fact of liberal religious Christian worship. The Dissenters dissented among themselves. The sacramental act of worship prevented the ongoing practice of dissent from turning the religious tradition of Dissent into a “grotesque assemblage of provincial eccentricities”. The liturgical act produces pious feelings, and pious feelings bind the congregants together as one worshipful community. Piety expresses and engenders the liturgical life of a people who have gathered together as a worshipful act.

Martineau affirmed piety as central to his project as master liturgist. He was thus both conservator and innovator, paying deference to both conservative feeling and critical probability.²⁸ Thus could he be a “Pietist in the Rationalist Tradition”.²⁹ His critique of the liturgical tradition within British religious Dissent was severe. The tradition, Martineau argued, had maintained the accoutrements of the Anglican and Catholic liturgical movements as these more conservative religious movements went beyond “the interior of Christ’s life” and established “an *ecclesiastical* type of Christianity” based on “what others have thought and said about him”. The secondary material produced by this process was then converted into what Martineau characterized as a “startling, dogmatic realism” that turned “spiritual symbols . . . into sacramental acts; apocalyptic imagery [into] literal fact; and in the calendar of the Church Year [transposed] the several acts in the drama of redemption [into] a hard precision which reduced even the pathos and the mystery to rule”.³⁰

Martineau’s scathing assessment of the “myths and fantasies” of this liturgical tradition was informed by a rigorously rational and systematic, modern school of biblical criticism. As Horton Davies notes in his book, *Worship and Theology in England: From Watts and Wesley to Martineau, 1690-1900*, Martineau found in sacred history a conglomeration of stories, intrigues, temperaments, cultural biases, and vested interests of the biblical compilers and editors.³¹ Martineau’s effort to find the permanent essence of Christian thought and feeling in the midst of these transient artefacts shifted the foundation of his faith from a Biblical Unitarianism to a “New Unitarianism” based on reason, conscience, and human sentiment.³²

Part of the foundation for this “newer Unitarianism of Martineau” was piety.³³ The “older Unitarianism” was fettered by a rationalism inured to feeling.³⁴ Thus does Horton Davies trenchantly note: “A religion of revolutionary red had turned to cerebral grey.”³⁵ Martineau revitalized the tradition by re-affirming its pious spirit. This spirit produced new thought and larger sentiment. In short, the dissonance that Martineau found in the liturgies he collected and edited revealed an open space of consonance for the Christian spirit. Between the limits of the actual historical and the socially contrived unhistorical accounts of this biblically based religion, Martineau saw “a vast debatable field, with contents at various distances from the two extremes; including not only miracles embarrassing to reverence as well as faith, but Messianic concepts and predictions, discrepant elements of narrative, and occasional passages of discourse so congenial with the tendencies of the second age as hardly to carry the authority of the first”.³⁶

For Martineau, the acknowledgement of this “vast debatable field” forced him to give up the hope for liturgical and creedal unanimity. The simultaneous wants of different minds, he conceded, could not be in perfect consent. Thus latitude must be allowed which would produce liturgies “at variance alike with the rule of logical consistency, and the fixed standard of an individual judgment”.³⁷

Martineau thus affirmed the appropriateness of dissent *within* a religious tradition. By so doing, Martineau practised what Paul Tillich, one of the pre-eminent Christian theologians of the twentieth century, called the “Protestant Principle” — “the critical element in the expression of the community of faith and consequently, the element of doubt in the act of faith”.³⁸ Faith affirms, transcends, and critiques itself.

James Luther Adams, the twentieth-century American Unitarian theologian, re-affirmed this religious tradition of critique in his essay, *The Liberal Christian Holds Up the Mirror*. Liberal Christianity, Adams tells us, “lives partly from its criticism of itself”. He reminds us that the very “method of liberalism” is critical honesty and open self-reflection.³⁹

Martineau, as liturgist, affirmed the unity that keeps the disbelievers, dissidents, and critics together: pious affection. Martineau thus found a way to both affirm and also move beyond the debate, critiques, and disputes. Piety, according to Martineau, was the new spirit of nineteenth-century religious sentiment that had begun to push Christians beyond “ecclesiastical mythology” by loosening its chains and freeing it from its own history.⁴⁰ This is the spirit that created the space for new directions, he said. Believers were now free to “waft their souls to God on Vedic hymns, or toil upwards by the steps of Gentile metaphysics”.⁴¹

For Martineau, this new spirit of religious sentiment pushed him beyond ecclesiastical mythologies. This is the spirit that allowed him to affirm the space for new directions within religious Dissent. Hymn #76 from his book of hymns and prayers identifies the essence of this doctrinally free place as the place beyond words. Appropriately, this hymn is called *The Silent Presence*.

Unheard the dews around me fall,
And heavenly influence shed;
And, silent on this earthly ball,
Celestial footsteps tread.

Night reigns in silence o'er the pole,
And spreads her gems unheard;
Her lessons penetrate the soul,
Yet borrow not a word.

Noiseless the sun emits his fire,
And pours his golden streams;
And silently the shades retire
Before his rising beams.

Oh! Grant my soul an ear to hear
Thy deed and silent voice;
To bend in lowly filial fear,
And in thy love rejoice.⁴²

For Martineau, this pious spirit drew him away from the apostolic tradition in order to dive deep into the original source of Christian life: the pure and personal essence of the religion of Christ. Here, Martineau found the true fulfilment of the Christian aim of life: inward self-surrender.⁴³ In the depths of such personal surrender, he was able to “walk with God”, hour by hour.

Engagement Groups: Bringing Forth the Future from the Past

Today, Small Group Ministries provide this hour-by-hour walk with God. The movement begins when participants look within themselves and find stories drawn from the wellsprings of their own lives. The next step occurs when they share their stories. When this happens, the collective expansiveness of the group’s stories broadens each participant’s own sense of identity. Through a rhythmic movement of call and response, point and counterpoint, personal stories blend as the sacred ground of human nature is revealed.

Small Group Ministries enact the power of the beloved community. Engagement Groups in Great Britain, to use the words Martineau, will “embrace the new thought and larger sentiment which they themselves

have been instrumental in creating". This liturgical method of engagement will bring forth the future from the past. For Martineau, the new liturgy was hymn and prayer. Today, the new liturgy will produce a new organizational structure that can help revitalize Unitarian and Free Christian Churches. Engagement Groups can produce an organizational structure that will grow churches as a sacred liturgical act of the people. Small Group Ministries grow churches because they are the church come alive again, the power of life ever-afew.

The Center for Community Values is available to you as a resource centre and networking co-ordinator to help you create this new liturgy of engagement in your congregations. Engagement is the people's work.

Thank you.

¹ Aidan Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 85.

² Ibid, 76.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Hebrews 11:1 NRSV.

⁶ James Martineau, "Preface", in *Hymns of Praise and Prayer* (London: Longmans, Green, Reader and Dyer, 1874), xvii.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Kavanagh, 93.

⁹ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1958), 75ff.

¹⁰ James Luther Adams, "My Social Concern", in *Voluntary Associations: Socio-cultural Analyses and Theological Interpretation*, ed. J. Ronald Engel (Chicago: Exploration Press, 1986), 10.

¹¹ Matthew 18:20 NRSV.

¹² Kavanagh, 77.

¹³ Calvin Dame, *Small Group Ministry Resource Book* (Augusta, Maine: Unitarian Universalist Community Church).

¹⁴ Bob Hill, interview by author, April 2001.

¹⁵ P. S. Minear, "The Idea of the Church", in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, eds. G. A. Buttrick, T.S. Kepler, J. Knox, H. G. May, S. Terrien, E. S. Bucke (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 608-617.

¹⁶ Kavanagh, 76.

¹⁷ Bob Hill, "A Brief History: The Roots of Covenant Groups", in *A Covenant Group Source Book* (Chicago: The Center for Community Values, 2001), 16-17.

¹⁸ Jacob John Sessler, *Communal Pietism Among Early American Moravians* (New York: Henry Holt and Co.), 1966, 6.

¹⁹ Ibid., 24.

²⁰ Ibid., 24ff.

²¹ Carl F. George with Warren Bird, *Nine Keys to Effective Small Group Leadership* (Mansfield, PA: Kingdom Publishing, 1997), 9.

²² Carl F. George, *Prepare Your Church for the Future* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Barker Book House Co., 1991), 121-122.

²³ Ibid., 129.

²⁴ Martineau, viii-ix.

²⁵ James Martineau and Thomas Sadler, "Preface", *Common Prayer for Christian Worship* (1862), 2-3, cited by Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology: From Watts and Wesley to Martineau: 1690-1900* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), Vol. IV, 276.

²⁶ Martineau, xiv.

²⁷ Ibid., xvi.

²⁸ Ibid., xiii.

²⁹ Davies, 269.

³⁰ Ibid., vi-vii.

³¹ Davies, 182, 267-9.

³² Ibid., 267-81.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 266.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Martineau, xi.

³⁷ Ibid., xii.

³⁸ P. Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1957), 29.

³⁹ James Luther Adams, *An Examined Faith: Social Context and Religious Commitment*, ed. George K. Beach (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), 311.

⁴⁰ Martineau, viii.

⁴¹ Ibid., x.

⁴² "The Silent Presence", in *Hymns of Praise and Prayer*, #76.

⁴³ Martineau, viii.

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