

**Small Group Ministry – Why Here? Why Now?**  
**by the Rev. Ann Schranz**  
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We humans are a tribal people. To feel as though we belong, we need to feel ourselves to be members of one or more “tribes” -- or perhaps “bands” within “tribes.” In recent weeks, I have been reflecting on “tribe” as historical fact and “tribe” as metaphor. Courtesy of Netflix, I recently finished viewing an outstanding 14-year-old television miniseries called “500 Nations.”<sup>1</sup> It is a heartbreaking look at the experiences of the indigenous people on this continent when they encountered Europeans. I cannot use the words “band” or “tribe” as *positive* metaphors without also remembering the violence and mistreatment inflicted upon the indigenous people of this continent by Europeans. Thank goodness for our capacity to hold multiple meanings in tension, expanding consciousness as we go.

As a tribal people, we need to feel ourselves at home within a network of a couple of dozen families. We may enjoy time spent in larger groups, and we may enjoy time spend in smaller groups. Nevertheless, a deep sense of belonging comes from feeling ourselves at home within a network of a couple of dozen families. This congregation is one such place. *Belonging* is not all that congregational life is about, but if members, friends, and visitors do not feel a sense of belonging, your hopes and dreams for congregational life are unlikely to become reality. The new small group ministry program is about honest, respectful listening and speaking. It is about authentic connection. It is about belonging -- and stretching. It is by, for, and about you.

I should be accustomed to the following sights by now, but I am not: People who look like science fiction cyborgs with a single ear ornament fetish, talking to an invisible friend in the grocery store, in the airport, on the street. People who look like they are training for the world thumb wrestling championship by texting away on tiny keyboards. People whose moods rise and fall with the quantity and quality of email they receive.

Granted, the abundance of electronic, non face-to-face methods of communication is a blessing for those who are geographically separated from loved ones and from kindred spirits. I would

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<sup>1</sup> See [http://www.netflix.com/Movie/500\\_Nations\\_Disc\\_4/70003639](http://www.netflix.com/Movie/500_Nations_Disc_4/70003639).

not turn back the clock. However, one unintended consequence of bits and bytes and ring tones and text messages is that the bar has been raised regarding what makes a *face-to-face* gathering worthwhile. No longer do we react with knee-jerk predictability: If it is Tuesday, it is bowling night. If it is the second Wednesday of the month, it is the League of Women Voters. If it is Sunday morning, it is time for the Sunday service.

Face-to-face meetings have to be more valuable today than ever before because so much can be done *without* them. Much of what we *need* to do can be done without meeting face to face. Yet needs are not the same as wants. Longing and loneliness can become more pronounced in the glow of a computer screen.

In a column entitled “Long Live the Corner Café,” Los Angeles Times columnist Gregory Rodriguez writes, “[The academics and the foundations] tend to want people to come together with some sort of common purpose or agenda. They are so mired in the realm of policy and politics, they don’t understand that what Americans need is more nonrational, nonpurposeful interaction with people with whom they have no common cause . . . That’s where cafes and bars and diners come in

. . . Coffeehouses, corner bars, and restaurants free people from ‘the obligations of social roles and the styles and demeanor with which those roles must be played. Here, individuals may uncork that which other situations require them to bottle up.’”<sup>2</sup>

I must frequent the wrong coffeehouses, corner bars, and restaurants -- or not frequent them often enough, because for me they have not been what is called a “third place” (a place other than home and work which helps a person get through life. Given the abysmal economic outlook, a “third place” is more important than ever because of homes at risk and jobs at risk. This congregation can be a “third place.

However, except possibly for the most extraverted among us, relating to each other solely on Sunday morning will not be enough. Coffee hour, as much fun as it is, can be difficult for

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<sup>2</sup> “Long Live the Corner Café” by Gregory Rodriguez, *Los Angeles Times*, December 21, page A21. See <http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/la-oe-rodriguez1-2008dec01,0,5160207.column>.

introverts, for newer members, and for visitors. Hospitality means having a variety of ways for people to get to know each other and to show that they care for each other. The small group ministry program is an offer of hospitality to everyone – visitors, newer members, and longer term members alike.

The small group ministry program begins next month. There are four different groups, each led by a team of facilitators. Each group will have 8 to 12 members. Each group meets twice a month for three months, so the commitment is for six sessions. Each session is typically two hours long. In each session, there is time for each participant to reflect on a theme. Small group ministry is about listening, as much as it is about speaking. Each group will disband in late March. Not to worry -- there will be a chance to sign up for another round (April through June). We will take a break over the summer and begin again next fall.

I invite you to sign up for one of the four groups. The groups meet on Sunday afternoon, Monday evening, Tuesday evening, and Wednesday during the day. Please write your name and contact information on a piece of paper and place it in the box for the day you prefer. You may sign up any time during the next three weeks.

The name of the team of facilitators for each group is intentionally absent. Why? The value of the small group ministry does not depend on being in a group with facilitators who you know and like. In fact, greater value may come from participating in a group with facilitators who you do not know very well or do not particularly “click” with. In these small group sessions, no one has to compete for the floor, and the opportunities for “intimacy and ultimacy” encourage participants to be reflective and to stretch, philosophically and theologically.

These groups do not replace the congregation’s existing affinity groups. The men’s group, the BUUK (book) group, and the young adult group will continue. Members of affinity groups have something obvious in common with each other. Participants in the small group ministry program may find that they have something in common with other group members, but this is likely to be no obvious characteristic, and whatever they hold in common may take some time to discover.

Speaking of the young adult group, I celebrate the dozen or so young adults that have found each other here. The young adults have their own email list, and they have gone as a group at least twice to the Sunday service at Neighborhood Unitarian Universalist Church in Pasadena. They are looking to connect with other Unitarian Universalist young adults in this area.

One of these young adults is Robert Tidwell, who spoke earlier this morning. Among other creative endeavors, Robert is the author of a comic book. Three of his characters (illustrated by artist Renzo Podesta) are on the cover of the Order of Service this morning.<sup>3</sup> By the way, Renzo lives in Argentina. Robert emails Renzo the story line, and Renzo draws the art. What a great use of electronic communication!

One of my intentions in the coming year is to promote diversity in the music of the Sunday service and to promote diversity in the art on the cover of the Order of Service. In order not to misappropriate music or art, it is a good idea to understand its context. So, who are these people on the cover of this Order of Service? What is their relationship to each other? Robert says that Elya, the woman at the center of the drawing (who is holding a flaming chalice), is confused about her identity and sense of self. She is lonely and seems to lack a sense of community with the world around her.

When she meets Polyhymnia (the figure on the left), Elya realizes that part of who she is, is gay. She falls for Polyhymnia. Polyhymnia is the Greek muse of sacred poetry or hymn. In the story she comes off very Unitarian Universalist, says Robert, because she loves spiritual expression and is really inspiring. She loves the human experience even though she has never had it, being a deity.

Osiris (the figure on the right) is not the god Osiris; he just shares the name. He is an angry and fearful person who seeks to be protected. He finds his path in religion with a group that is based on fear and isolationism. Without really realizing it, Osiris takes on homophobic and anti-woman beliefs. When his sister falls in love with a woman, he does not like it.

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<sup>3</sup> This story line is what Robert Tidwell told me.

The plot of the story is basically this: Elya meets Polyhymnia. They fall in love, and they try to run away from Elya's brother (and his trying to control Elya). They get separated. Calliope, the muse of heroic epic tales, prevents Polyhymnia from reuniting with Elya. Calliope is a very jealous deity, and she has hated Polyhymnia for a very long time. Calliope makes the other seven muses hunt Elya. Elya overpowers each muse, in turn, in her quest to find her lover.

This entire time, Elya is being hunted by her brother, who wants to “save” her from herself (at least that’s what he believes). He and his new group of friends hunt Elya until she finally confronts him and tells him to get over his power trip. He cannot do that. He cannot get over his bigotry, so he disowns Elya. In the end, Robert says, he becomes the god Osiris.

This is a story as old as the Greeks and as contemporary as Proposition 8. Every one of us has a story. Every one of us deserves a respectful place to share it. Every one of us has a hand in creating such a place. As we approach holidays whose usual frenzy may be muted this year by economic forces outside our control, may we remember all that is within our power. May we love and show our love. May we care and show our caring. May we cultivate gratitude. May it be so!