

Birmingham Lecture

Deepening Our Call

Healing Hearing: Saving Our Planet in Circles of Ten

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What a wonderful tactical position I am in this morning, following immediately after the moving remarks of Rebecca Parker and asking you to turn your attention to church administration. If anybody had told me at the beginning of my ministry that I would someday be passionate about a method of organizing our churches, I'd have laughed in his face. But I am. After 30-some years of Unitarian Universalist ministry, I am literally caught up in excitement about a method of organizing our churches that can let us avoid the difficulties inherent in our diversity, serve better those who need us, and, through serving better, cease to be statistically insignificant.

A largely grass-roots movement in our churches has spread across our continent with remarkable speed during the last five years. It is, as our colleague, John Morgan, has noted, a movement that lets us address the two primary needs of those who come through our front doors, needs that Dr. James Luther Adams labeled "ultimacy and intimacy." It is a kind of shared ministry approach which some of us call "small-group ministry" and some call "the Covenant Group movement." I have come to think of it as Covenant Group Ministry, and my commitment to it begins with this statement of faith:

I believe that when a small group of Unitarian Universalists meets together regularly with a facilitator and a format that encourages listening and the sharing of feelings and ideas,

1. the members of the group will deepen their commitment to each other, to their church, and to Unitarian Universalism;
2. they will be more likely to become effective workers for change in their larger communities;
3. and, at the same time, they will get more from being part of their church than they ever have before.

For a Covenant Group Theology, I suggest you contact Thandeka at Meadville/Lombard Theological School and ask for her paper on bio-power, ideational-power and mutual-power, three concepts with roots reaching back to, among others, George De Benneville, Emile Durkheim, Martin Buber, and (no surprise to those of you who know her) Friedrich Schleiermacher. Thandeka finds a strong theological base for her belief that the Covenant Group movement can be a vehicle for social change in our faith and beyond.

My considerations, though, are mostly pragmatic. I simply observe that people are changed by the experience of small-group ministries and that, as a result, they deepen their commitment to their church and to Unitarian Universalism. I expect an increase in their effectiveness as change agents in their communities, and although there is nothing here about the ends to which that effectiveness may be directed, I expect those ends to be positive because I do, in fact, believe in the basic goodness of our people and the ethical and moral efficacy of our free religion.

Now, I can just hear my mentor in Field Staff work, Russell Lockwood, warning me not to be a "bluebird," by which he meant a naive, overly-optimistic person. So maybe I'd better pull back a little and

tell you about a somewhat darker, personal story about my motivation for being evangelical about a method that I think will let us serve well and flourish.

A Story

I want to tell you a story about my religious up-bringing or lack thereof, about Universalism in Texas and about a colleague, now deceased, who was known as Tex Prater. Stories matter to us so deeply. That is one of the reasons that Covenant Group Ministry works so well. People hear each other's stories in bits and pieces and they get to tell some of their own life stories to respectful listeners. There is so much healing in telling and being heard, just as I assume there was healing for Rebecca Parker and Rita Brock in the creation of their book, Proverbs of Ashes. My story is in no way comparable to theirs in the intensity of the personal traumas involved, but it is a story that shaped my life nevertheless. It is the story of an absence of what might have been a saving grace rather than the story of a trauma. It is a story of a failure to be present for people in need. It is the story of the failure of Universalist groups in Texas. It is a story that contains for us a moral lesson if we choose to heed it.

I was living here in Alabama, in Auburn, in 1982 and beginning a year of circuit-riding ministry to eight congregations in this region when someone told me about a Universalist minister just up the road a few miles, Leonard C. "Tex" Prater. When I visited him, I was surprised to find not only an interesting colleague, but also a fine church building and a small congregation of Universalists in the tiny Alabama town of Camp Hill.

Tex told me something during my first visit that shocked me. It shocked me so much that I got him to let me interview him on tape and I listened to his voice again just the other day in preparation for these remarks. He told me that there had once been Universalist congregations in the area of Texas where I grew up. From birth until the day after my graduation from high school, I lived on a farm between Abilene and San Angelo, and very near there, in rural communities around Brownwood and Sweetwater, in Rotan and Newcastle, and other rural communities, Tex told me, there had been Universalist congregations.

Texas Universalists

Our colleague Barbara Coeyman has done extensive research on the Universalists of Texas and some of her research shows that between 1850 to 1940 there was a significant rise and fall of Universalism in Texas. The Universalist Convention in Texas was formally organized in 1886. Around 1900, there were about 20 Universalist parishes in Texas, three with buildings, and two more planning to put up buildings, and they claimed about 2,000 members. That may not sound like many, but I'm confident that it constituted a higher percentage of the Texas population at that time than we can claim today. Circuit riding preachers were having a hard time keeping up with the demand for their services.

And these Universalists were on the side of the angels, in my book, on a lot of important issues. With strong female as well as male lay leadership, according to what Barbara has found, these folk passed resolutions at their state conventions expressing themselves as being against capital punishment as early as 1892, as opposing war in 1894, and, in the same year, more than 100 years ago, calling for equal pay for equal work for women. Of course, they were also for prohibition, but nobody's perfect.

There were no residual echoes of any of that liberal ferment as I grew up with four younger brothers ten miles from the nearest town, before television forever changed rural isolation. Ours was a religiously conflicted, spiritually lonely family. My dad was a fallen-away Methodist, a classic Unitarian without knowing it who disdained religion and those who practiced it, clergy especially. My mother, although she did the expected thing and became nominally Methodist when she married my dad, never completely got over the fire and brimstone faith of her family's church, the Church of Christ, the conservative Southern variety.

The community in which I grew up was one in which a good Christian teacher could embarrass a fourth grader in front of the rest of his class because his impoverished father was late in paying for the boy's

school lunches. A good church-going family regularly carried their teenage daughter to a neighbor's house to wait for the school bus because they also had a teenage son and feared leaving them alone together. A good Christian neighbor of ours could slap his wife's face in public and get away with it. School segregation was a given until the courts mandated change, and separate was always far from equal. This was a community that never heard of universal salvation for anybody.

Well, no. That's not true. There had been, Tex Prater told me, Universalist societies not so far from where, as a small boy, I had been terrified by a movie shown in church on a bed sheet, a movie depicting in images so powerful that I still remember them well, the death of a drunkard as crosses and flames swirled around him. Universalist churches in the area where I grew up?! Where, if not in hell, were they when I came along? Where were our no-hell Christian churches when my two parents, literate, inquisitive, spiritually evolving, but environmentally deprived people, were living their lives and rearing five boys on a dry-land farm? How is it that I had to wait until I was twenty years old and a student in Austin before I even heard the name Universalist or Unitarian?

Failures

Tex said he failed with these Texas Universalists and that he had to move east to find Universalists more willing to change with the times. It seems, though, that they failed him, also. The problem, according to Tex, was that the Universalists he was dealing with in my part of Texas were "no-hell Christians" and proud of it. They were better educated, for the most part, than their Baptist and Methodist and Church of Christ neighbors, and they loved debating the issue of eternal damnation.

Tex had been persuaded by the dean of St. Lawrence Theological School to study to become a Universalist minister. When he graduated, he returned from St. Lawrence, as planned, to serve the Universalist groups of his origins. It must have been quite a story at the time: "Local Boy Makes Good, Returns Home to Serve." But there were two problems. One was that Leonard's St. Lawrence education had given him viewpoints not shared back home. And the other was that his ordination coincided with the start of the Great Depression. Texas Universalist Convention ordained him on August 18, 1929.

In 1930, Tex said in a letter that Barbara Coeyman found in the Harvard Archives, "There is some thought that I am not preaching Universalism because I do not deal very much with the idea that there is no hell." He wanted the Texas Universalists he served to focus more on other issues of their times. They would not, he told me. They enjoyed debating too much, and their identity was tied too closely to the arguments against hell. The Rev. Leonard Prater's return to his Texas roots lasted only two years. By September, 1931, Tex had moved on to become the Superintendent of the Georgia Convention, and, by all accounts, Universalism in Texas was soon in free-fall. Many of the letters Barbara has collected from this period are sad.

Leonard Prater returned during his last years in Texas. In the late 1980s, as he'd told me that he would, he visited my parents at their farm north of Coleman, less than 50 miles from Brownwood, where he was then living with a brother of his. One day, when I called home from Boston, I had the following conversation with my mother:

Mother: "Your Universalist minister friend was here last week."

"Tex Prater?"

"Yes."

"Did you enjoy his visit?"

"Your Daddy did."

Then she recounted for me some of the conversation that had begun in the farmhouse living room fairly early one morning and continued well into the afternoon. Obviously, my father and Tex Prater had a lot to

talk about and it seems that Tex did most of the talking. It was old-time Universalism, pure and simple, relayed with enthusiasm and joy.

My mother told me that she finally decided that if she asked Tex if he could stay for lunch, he might say that he had to get on home.

"So, did you ask him?" I said on the phone.

"Yes, and he said, 'Sure, I'd be glad to.' So I had to get up and fry some chicken while he and your Daddy kept right on talking."

It may well have been Tex Prater's last evangelical foray. All three of the characters in this little drama are dead now. I don't know much about the quality of Tex Prater's last years, but I know that my parents' lives could have been much better at the end than they were.

I have lived most of my adult life in the context of a religious community, I am grateful to say. Here at this gathering, in our churches, at summer institutes, I feel that I am part of a vast family. I know that other Unitarian Universalists do, too, both clergy and lay. My father never had anything like that. My mother never had anything like that. My parents lived spiritually lonely lives in West Texas and it didn't have to be so.

What if the little country church at Maizeland, two miles from where we lived, had been Universalist instead of Methodist? What if that had been a Universalist church able to offer my father's nonconformist mind comfort and challenge? Would he have been open to going there on Sundays? He believed that heaven and hell are conditions people create for themselves, in this life, by the ways they choose to live. He took an instant liking to Tex Prater and delighted in what Tex had to say. I think the Universalists would have had a chance with him and he with them. My mother was witty and outgoing. If my dad had found a church he could attend, she would have joined and blossomed in church work.

Options Not Available

But if Tex Prater was right, the Universalists who might have offered my family a liberal community were nowhere to be seen for this reason: they debated their churches out of existence. They were right, they knew they were right, they insisted on proclaiming their correctness, and they dried up like a shallow puddle in the August sun. That is their story as I understand it.

Either from willfulness or from not knowing how, our Texas Universalist forefathers and foremothers failed to build the necessary institutions that could have spread the good news of the free church to the backwoods and the prairies around them. And they didn't do so well in the cities either or in the other regions of the continent. Certainly their Unitarian counterparts were not roaring successes. Nor have our merged congregations, as a whole, flourished. Here we are, at the beginning of the 21st Century, and Sikhs outnumber us in our own country.

You know the statistics. Continent-wide, some 80% of our churches are small. We average less than 150 members per church and we'll never change that until we decide that we want to serve people who need us more than we want to debate with each other. We will never prosper as a religion until we find an effective means of serving those who need our churches just as much as we needed them before we found them, just as much as my parents needed them, just as much as any member of your congregation needed us before finding us.

Whitehead says somewhere that sin is failure to achieve potential. If so, we Unitarian Universalists have sinned just as surely as those little Universalist congregations did, and for some of the same reasons. We have been proud and contentious at times. Our way of organizing our churches has led us into fights with each other. We say that our diversity is our strength, but it has not been. Our diversity is an asset and it is a potential strength, but when we try to conduct our churches according to the methods and ideas I've

known through most of my ministry, our diversity hobbles us. Our churches need purpose, need direction, need mission. Open forums guided by Robert's Rules of Order have not provided the unity of purpose we need.

Our diversity in theologies and social mores and philosophy and politics has made us afraid to say what we think about matters nearest to our hearts. So many of our lay folk and perhaps many of us as well, for good reason, have adopted a "don't ask, don't tell" attitude where our deepest beliefs are concerned. At GA several years ago, two worship leaders, colleagues who are here today, perhaps, told stories of terminally-ill parishioners, one a man, one a woman. Both spoke to their ministers about what they'd missed in their Unitarian Universalist experience. "All I wanted was to talk with others about the journey of life," the man said. And the woman said, "We never provided opportunities for discussion of what was most important to me." And then they died. Our churches failed them, and their ministers, in talking about them at GA, were mourning those failures.

But now we have Covenant Group Ministry. Now we have small group organization, and in groups of 10 or less, with a facilitator, people can build up the trust that is required if they are to open up about what is most important to them. In Covenant Groups, people get to know each other quickly. Rationalists discover that then can endure mystics and the lion can, if not lie down with, at least listen to, the lamb. I have seen it happen. In the context of a group of ten or fewer, with a facilitator and a covenant of behavior, trust grows quickly and the fabric of the group is not so easily torn by our firmly-held and diverse views.

Glenn Turner called my attention to small-group ministry, and in so doing, he literally changed my life. He said that Frances Buckmaster had taken him aside and given him the same message, and that it changed his approach to Field Staff work as well as his plans for the retirement he is now enjoying. I imagine a scene like the one in the movie "The Graduate" in which the Dustin Hoffman character is given one word of advice by an older friend, "plastics." The two words Frances gave Glenn were "meta church." That's the term Carl George uses in his books for evangelical Christian churches in describing small-group ministry. Glenn spread the word to Calvin Dame, in Augusta, and elsewhere, and Glenn also told me about Jim Robinson, who has been using small-group ministry since 1982 in Brewster, MA, the only congregation I know in our Association that claims nearly 10% of the population of its drawing area as members. From Jim I learned that Dana McLain Greeley returned from a trip to Japan in the early 80s and told Jim, while both were at our Concord, MA, church, "I know why Rissho Kosei-kai is so huge. They're organized into small groups."

Reasons for Hope

You can trace the roots of our small-group ministries all the way back to the house churches of early Christianity, which preceded the building of the first Christian church buildings. But I am more interested in looking ahead. I see two facts that give me great hope. One is that we Unitarian Universalists have changed in recent years for the better, making ourselves more ready to live up to our long-vaunted potential. And the other is that we are riding a cultural wave as we move into Covenant Group Ministry.

A lot of good organizational work initiated by John Buehrens, Bill Schulz, Gene Pickett, Kay Montgomery, Denny Davidoff, Bill Sinkford, the Board of Trustees and your headquarters and field staffs, has begun to bear fruit. The word "process" used to be a fetish for some of us while it could cause an outbreak of hives in others, but lately it seems to me that we have come to a healthy, balanced awareness of the need for planning and follow-up in our churches. That is certainly true in my district, where the enthusiastic advocacy of our growth consultant, Jonalu Johnstone, has shown that we are more open to change than we were a couple of decades ago.

We Unitarian Universalists are even giving money at levels not normally seen in our churches before. The largest UUA capital fund drive in history has been launched with a much more successful beginning than most of us would have predicted, and two SW congregations that I know of have pledge averages of more than \$2,000 per unit per year. Now, finally, having in our grasp a way to provide spiritual uplift and friendship-building connections in non-contentions, listening-oriented small groups, we are in a position

to rock and roll.

A Quiet Revolution

And there's another thing moving in our favor. Our small-group movement, which has caught on so remarkably in a very short time in our Unitarian Universalist congregations, is in the crest of a larger wave. Please take a look at [Sharing the Journey](#) by Robert Wuthnow. A sociologist with a special interest in religion, Wuthnow has discovered, much to his own surprise, that 40% of Americans are currently involved in some sort of small group. (p. 342) Considering every variety of small group from Weight Watchers to AA to salons and church groups, he says, "The small-group movement has been effecting a quiet revolution in American society (p. 2), and it is "a profoundly important phenomena" that is "beginning to alter American society, both by changing our understandings of community and by redefining spirituality." (p. 3)

Small groups, whether people are assigned to them by the minister as our Augusta, Maine, church prefers, or they are self-selected affinity groups, retain diversity. We can provide situations, in small groups, for the like-minded to be together and celebrate what they have in common, and that is good. But even when folks have joined a Covenant Group for earth-centered spirituality, or for discussing libertarian politics, or for practicing meditation, they discover that however much they may share one interest, they are quite diverse in most ways. They still have to get along with each other. It is just ever-so-much easier to do so in a small group with a facilitator and a covenant. The rapidity with which mutual trust develops in a well-run Covenant Group is remarkable.

When was the last time we tried to bring about change and succeeded rapidly and well? Let me give you a hint about what I have in mind: When I came into ministry, there was a special term for the spouses of ministers. It was "wives." Look around you today and see the difference. We succeeded in moving away from the personal and institutional sexism that characterized my generation of ministers and those that came before me because, I believe, our efforts were buoyed and carried along by a parallel trend in our larger society. Not that all feminist issues have been solved, but we benefited from not having to go against a strong societal flow in another direction. The rapid and widespread acceptance of Covenant Group Ministry has been aided by the revolution in the larger society which Wuthnow identifies.

So what could stop us? Some lay people resist the amount of structure inherent in Covenant Group Ministry. But another point of resistance is closer to home. Some of us who are ministers will resist this.

Some will resist on the grounds that it is too simple. Shouldn't progress be driven by theological brilliance and pulpit eloquence? Certainly I admire both, but haven't we had flashes, at least of theological brilliance and pulpit eloquence during all the years of UUA growth at or below one percent? I tell members of minister-led congregations, "Don't even think about trying this unless your minister is enthusiastic about it because this is shared ministry and she or he has to be at the heart of it." So we ministers will have a lot to say about whether the small-group ministry movement is just a passing fad like the extended-family plans that were tried a couple of decades ago or if it is what I think it must be: a revolutionary change in how we do things. Calvin Dame and Glenn Turner are right in repeatedly saying that the shift to small-group ministry needs to be done deliberately and with planning. To serve best, Covenant Groups must be the enthusiastic joint effort of lay leaders and those of us who are their ministers.

A Different Approach

As Calvin has pointed out, small-group ministry does require a different approach to how we ministers perceive ourselves. If you haven't already read what he has written about this, ask him about the first time he learned that a Covenant Group had taken care of ministering to one of his parishioners who had suffered a death in the family. Small group ministry is a different sort of ministry and some of us will not prefer it. And some, I'm sure, doubt that this will work. To that doubt, I respond with a question Rabbi Friedman often used when his suggestions to patients were challenged: "Well, what you've been doing... has that worked?" No? Then, why not try something new?

Lots of us are willing to consider a different approach to ministry. Mellen Kennedy, a student at Meadville, says she thinks the incoming generation of ministers embrace the idea of small-groups readily, and I see evidence that that is true. Peter Bowden is having great success with young adults in Providence, RI, using age-cohort Covenant Groups. I hear lots of encouraging stories from subscribers to my email newsletter, "Covenant Group News," from both lay folk and ministers. I know that many of you are eagerly incorporating small-group techniques into your churches and giving them by a wide variety of titles, one of the best of which is in use in one of our Tulsa churches: "Circles of Hope." And I heard Arvid Straube say, at a meeting last December, "Eno River has 18 Covenant Groups and needs 20 more." So, I think we will overcome our resistances. But if you feel resistant... well, give small groups a try. As Brent Smith has said, small-groups are a conversion experience. Until you've felt the redeeming warmth of one, you won't believe what we proponents say about them. Once you do, you'll get excited, too.

With the progress we have made in recent years in other areas and with this tool for serving the two primary needs people bring to our churches when they show up at our front doors, I believe we may well be at the beginning of a Golden Age of Unitarian Universalism. According to Paul H. Ray there are more than three million Cultural Creatives in my District alone who would at least listen to our message. Many of them come through our doors every year but do not stay because they do not find the connection and inspiration Covenant Groups can give them. We can keep lots of those people. We can serve them in the ways they need to be served. If we do that well, we can usher in a Golden Age of Unitarian Universalism.

And if we fail? If we fail in this, if we fail to use this historic opportunity to give birth to a Golden Age of Unitarian Universalism, we will have failed families who need us just as badly as my family needed us. We will have missed a chance to be much more effective in bringing about change in the world, even in regard to the issue that can trump all other issues: saving our environment.

We will have left spiritually lonely people to the tender mercies of religions dogmatism on one hand and to rampant materialism on the other. We will have abandoned the many who needed us to the hot evangelism of 10,000-member mega churches and to the propaganda of "grab-all-the-gusto-you-can-get" television advertising. We will have given up whatever power we have to save the earth as a habitat for human beings.

I say we can't do that. I think we won't do that. I think we are going to work together to bring our churches, our Association, and our world into a Golden Age of Unitarian Universalism. Groups of ten give us the chance.

Ministry is about serving those who need us, and there are lots of them in our cities and even, sometimes, in isolated places where we wouldn't normally think to look.

May we serve well and prosper.

Appendix

COVENANT GROUP MINISTRY MANUAL

Six Necessary, Defining Elements

SIZE – About 10 people. At least four or five and not more than 12.

FREQUENCY of meeting – Once a month or more, in someone's home or at church if there is a quiet, private, living-room-like setting available regularly.

FORMAT – Must combine worshipful and/or centering readings and personal check-in periods at the start and at the end. (See the recommended format below.)

FACILITATORS – A person chosen and trained by the minister, or, in societies with no minister, a small Covenant Group Ministry Committee. The trainer facilitates a Covenant Group for Facilitators so the training is on-going and shared.

EMPTY CHAIR – Always at least one, to symbolize those not yet reached who need us *and* the expectation of helping start a new group as membership gets to 10 or so.

COVENANTS – During the second or third meeting, agree on how to be with each other. Later, agree on one service to perform for the church each year. Twice a year: find a way of doing something beneficial in the larger community as a group.

The Every-Meeting Format

OPENING READING, preferably from a Unitarian Universalist source (our hymn book contains enough material to sustain a Covenant Group for many months).

OPENING CHECK-IN: Each person is asked to briefly state her/his answer to a question such as: What's on your mind today? What seems most important to you these days?

THE FOCUS/PURPOSE OF THE MEETING: With the exception of political or divisive issues within the church: whatever topic or activity the group prefers, so long as it is consistent with our Purposes and Principles and the mission of the sponsoring church. The focus should be on how the topic/activity affects the lives of those present.

CLOSING CHECK-OUT: The facilitator asks each person for a word or phrase that says something about how she or he is feeling as the meeting draws to an end.

CLOSING READING – Again, from a standard Unitarian Universalist source.

March, 2002

Bibliography

SMALL GROUP ORGANIZATION FOR CHURCHES

The Coming Church Revolution: Empowering Leaders for the Future, Carl F. George, Fleming H. Revell, Grand Rapids, MI, 1994, 346 pages. Also see George's home page:
<http://www.metachurch.com/home.htm>

Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America's New Quest for Community, Robert Wuthnow, The Free Press, NY, etc., 1994, 463 pages in paperback.

For "Covenant Group News," go to www.swuuc.org, the SW District's web page, and find "Rev. Bob Hill's Page." Free sign-up, archived back issues.

The Center for Community Values (CCV) has published a Covenant Group Source Book that can be found at their web site: <http://www.the-ccv.org>.

Our Augusta, Maine, church offers A Small Group Ministry Resource Book by the Rev. Calvin Dame at their web site: <http://members.mint.net/uuccaug>. Also: Glenn Turner's Transforming Our Churches With Small Group Ministry

Designing and Implementing a Small Group Ministry Focus for Your Congregation by the Rev. Glenn H. Turner is available from the author: gturner2@maine.rr.com

CULTURAL CREATIVES

The Cultural Creatives: How 50 Million People Are Changing the World, Paul H. Ray and Sherry Ruth Anderson, Harmony Books, NY, 2000, 370 pages.

The Integral Culture Survey: A Study of the Emergence of Transformational Values in America, Research Report 96-A, by Paul H. Ray, the Institute of Noetic Sciences, Sausalito, CA, and Fetzer Institute, Kalamazoo, MI, 1996, 160 pages.

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