

#### PURPOSE OF THE SERVICE:

Present Small Group Ministry as part of the continuum of celebration, community, and spiritual growth

#### PRELUDE

#### GREETING AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

#### CHALICE LIGHTING

The lighting of the chalice calls us to be present in this place and time. With the lighting of this chalice, we acknowledge that "for everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven." A time to celebrate, a time to share, and a time to grow. These are distinct and yet come together in the function of this holy community.

OPENING WORDS Rev. Glenn Turner, Northeast District Minister  
"I believe that the mission of the Unitarian Universalist Church is to address the social isolation and rootlessness that is characteristic of modern life, to minister to the hurts and hopes of those in our community, and to radically define our community beyond our membership borders, seeking to bring other people who need our support into our churches and into our lives."

HYMN *Singing the Living Tradition* (SLT) #40 "The Morning Hangs a Signal"

#### CANDLES OF COMMUNITY/JOYS AND CONCERNS

This is a time for sharing as you wish with those of us here this morning. And knowing that not all of our feelings are expressed, may we hold each other in our hearts and minds.

#### CHILDREN'S FOCUS

#### READING

"It Matters How We "Do Church" Based on Kennon Callahan, *Twelve Keys to an Effective Church* by HZ.

In a relational church,

We focus on our hurts and hopes;

We -- participants in this community -- visit the unchurched, the newcomers, those among us who are ill, lonely, isolated;

Our worship is holistic, planned and led by laity and clergy;

We have caring groups in which people may discover roots, place and belonging;

We nurture our leaders to be relational and caring with individuals and groups in our community;

Our structure is focused on our strengths, hopes and mission.

Relational focus influences functions :

Our programs serve, rather than use, people;

Our structures are accessible to our members and to the larger community;

We are visible in our community, known through the grapevine as well as by media;

Our facilities, landscaping, space and parking focus on people rather than on materials;

We put our financial resources into people rather than property, and we exercise responsible, courageous stewardship.

#### MEDITATION *SLT* #501 Frederick Gillis

Spirit of community, in which we share and find strength and common purpose, we turn our minds and hearts toward one another seeking to bring into our circle of concern all who need our love and support; Those who are ill, those who are in pain, either in body or in spirit, those who are lonely, those who have been wronged.

We are part of the web of life that makes us one with all humanity, one with all the universe.

We are grateful for the miracle of consciousness that we share, the consciousness that gives us the power to remember, to love, to care.

(added)

And in the same spirit of community, let us share in the celebration of life itself,

In the daily treasures of nature and of companionship, of new life and changing seasons.

We are part of the web of life that makes us one with all humanity, one with all the universe.

We are grateful for the miracle of consciousness that we share, the consciousness that gives us the power to remember, to love, to care. May we pause for a moment of silent reflection.  
Amen.

OFFERING Our offering is a celebration of resources, a recognition of our stewardship. We take the offering for the benefit of this church and its wider concerns.

DOXOLOGY (The usual response used by the congregation)

RESPONSIVE READING *SLT* # 468 "We Need One Another"

HYMN *SLT* #360 "Here We Have Gathered"

READING

"Affirmations of Relational Groups" adapted, by Glenn Turner

As I see it, the very nature of [the relational] group process affirms the worth and dignity of each of its members. It's about justice, equity, and compassion in its approach outward to invite people who are not now guests at anyone's table. It's all about acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth. It is the setting for a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. The right of conscience is always underscored. It is democratic to the core. I will not suggest that it will usher in a world community of peace, liberty and justice for all. But, depending on what might be discussed, it might, as it might also foster respect for the interdependent web of life. Moreover, the living traditions we draw from can be incorporated in our focus themes, [and are part of what

each of us bring to ministry] - a rich treasure trove from which to draw. The small group ministry can lead to a fuller flowering of our Principles and Purposes."

SERMON "Our Own Ministry" Rev. Helen Zidowecki

We all have a ministry to do. We all have a ministry to do – in this church. I would like us to think of ministry in the holistic manner I will be speaking of Small Group Ministry. I know that you have explored this concept. Come with me and look at the broad picture of how this concept fits into the work of the church.

Let us start with the *concept of vision*. Vision is seeing, literally using our eyes. But vision is also seeing beyond the present. Vision is our collective hope. As Unitarian Universalists, we have a vision of love, and justice, and goodness. Look at our hymns: "We'll Build A Nation," and "As We Come Marching, Marching" and "We are a Gentle, Angry People." And our opening hymn expresses a vision:

“Above the generations the lonely prophets rise, while truth flares as the daystar within their glowing eyes;

And other eyes, beholding, are kindled from that flame, and dawn becomes the morning, when prophets love proclaim.”

Vision is played out in the here and now in the form of witness, of being present. The existence of this church in this community is a witness to that vision.

We each have a vision of what our church can do in a community. That is part of what draws us to a church. There are times when the vision is bright, there are times when the vision is dim. Sometimes the vision sometimes gets clouded by such concerns as like church membership and financial resources. When our vision is relational -- involving people rather than things -- we renew the spirit. If our vision remains theoretical, it will elude us; it is only by letting our vision capture our hearts that we can move toward it.

And vision leads to the *concept of mission*, a statement of what we are about as a faith community. I read the mission that Glenn Turner wrote as my opening words. The focus of those words is mission as ministry. Ministry is being caring for, about and with each other. Mission becomes relational:

to address the social isolation and rootlessness that is characteristic of modern life,  
to minister to the hurts and hopes of those in our community,  
to bring other people who need our support into our churches and into our lives."

Vision as seeing beyond where we are; mission as ministry as the way we implement vision. These are components that make our faith communities vital, living and growing institutions.

We come to a religious community for several specific things, so that how we "do church" is important. I want to present three components to this "doing church": worship or celebration, community, and resources for our individual personal growth. But if we come for any one of these alone, and ignore the others, but we probably will not keep coming back.

Worship focuses on the "Worth -ship" of each person, our time together celebrates each other and our being together. We can worship in isolation, but must celebrate in community. It is very lonely to celebrate a birthday – the day that really acknowledges our birth, our existence and our worth -- alone. And when we come together in worship as a congregation, we are proclaiming that we have a worth, a value, and a place in this community. We are celebrating the past, the present, and the vision of the future for this faith community. Services on Sunday morning say, "We're Here! And we have something to offer."

But if all we do is come together to celebrate for an hour a week, how meaningful is that for us for the entire week? We come also for a sense of community. When I look at the order of service--built on my

understanding of things that were included somewhat regularly – I see a number of times that there are connections: Announcements, the Joys and Concerns, The Greetings of Peace, and the words of the covenant. The Universalist tradition is one of community, of caring about people's souls, the worth of each person and the salvation of each person. This leads very well into the concept of a 'relational church community.'

Now we are getting into discussion of Small Group Ministry. "Relational" focuses on smaller closer groups, which is part of the whole. Studies show that the largest group that can really function as a relational group is a maximum of 10 people, including the facilitator and assistant facilitator, and whomever is hosting the session. Beyond ten, the dynamics are just too much for us to handle comfortably on an intimate level.

Many times we feel that we "know" each other in the congregation. We may know the vital statistics, like where we live, where we work or our avocations, possibly birthdays, and maybe even ages. But when have you set aside time to discuss "Living Through Loss," "What to Celebrate," "Learning from Failure," "Forgiveness," "Retirement," "Living Simply," "What We Love," "Gratitude," "Spiritual Journey." These are just the beginning array of topics that can be considered if we take time to be in community with one another.

I belong to a small group in the Augusta church. I have known some of the people in the group for the 20 years that I have been a member of that church, and some I have known only since joining the group a couple of months ago. When we greet each other at the celebration on Sunday morning, it is with a new and deeper understanding of each other as individuals. And when we need each other -- and we all at some point need another-- we will have established a deeper basis for our caring because we have shared of ourselves, because we have been enriched by the sharing of others. There are times when we say, "I really want to share this, and feel comfortable and safe doing it here in this small group."

The small group ministry will change the congregation. Glenn expresses the change this way,

"Generally, I have found that individuals to whom this idea is presented are excited about the possibilities. They feel it would give them what they care for. There are some, however, who see it as a different kind of church than they joined. It asks more of them, personally, and seems threatening. It's one thing to share ideas; another to share your life. One thing to debate another person's theories, another to respond to their soul. Then, there's the question of time. There is a persistent myth that people don't have time for church any more. There are too few people for too many jobs. I think this has to do more with the unrewarded nature of most church efforts. Institutional survival modes sap energy. When we're not getting what we came for (spiritual inspiration, community, religious growth), than what we do in the service of the church is tiring. Being fed spiritually and communally is energizing. When things are going well, people have time to participate without complaint. The very fact that the small-group ministry churches are growing dramatically says something about what it is tapping into in terms of people's time and energy."

I am not going into the structure of small group ministry this morning, except to Or as Callahan says, "We have caring groups in which people may discover roots, place and belonging." I am say that:

- Not everyone in a congregation needs to be in a group; nor does everyone have to "join" at the same time.
- There is a mechanism for including people as they enter the church community in a relational manner, that is not "being on a committee."
- People from outside the current church community can be invited to join a group.
- The small groups in this ministry are not therapy groups or educational groups; they are ministry groups.
- There are facilitators for the groups and a support network for them.

Small group ministry enriches the celebration and worship, because it increases our sense of "worth" and belonging within the community. It is the juncture between the worship and the third part to "how we do church". From the worship and the community, we have increased resources and impetus to develop our own spiritual path. In fact, the small groups provide an outlet for our exploration, the expression of our own spiritual growth. There have been times within the small group that we arrive at spiritual awakening or understanding. The small groups provide an opportunity to discuss our spiritual practices and to express where we are on our spiritual journey. Sometimes this is intentional, like using the topic of "Spiritual Journeys" or "Spiritual or Life-meaning Symbols." But increasingly, being spiritual is just part of being in a small group.

This relational church is a concept that is not for adults alone. Let's talk about our children, about our religious education. William Ellery Channing, in "The Great End in Religious Instruction," summarized the discussion by saying that "In a word, the great end is to awaken the soul, to excite and cherish spiritual life."

Developmentally, children identify with the people first, then the learning. A relational community starts at the very beginning to develop a sense of worth, a belonging, and a security for the facing difficult issues that face our children and youth. Then we need people who are excited and willing to share faith and spiritual journeys and to be present with our children. There are plenty of materials, curriculum, and methods for implementing religious education, based on the premise of relations.

Some of the small group ministry concepts are very pertinent to religious education, such as recognizing and welcoming each group member individually, having cards or materials to make cards for someone who is absent from the group, and leaving an empty chair for someone who has not found their way to the group yet. Even the

"busy-ness" of taking attendance becomes "attending to" rather than "who is attending."

So from our vision and our sense of mission as ministry, we develop the way we "do" church. We celebrate, we are in community, and we are supported in our spiritual growth. And this is the way that we educated our children religiously.

So Small Group Ministry can be part of the total church community. When, and how, to start depends on what is going on in the congregation as a whole.

The hymn that we sang just before I started talking, "Here We Are Gathered," is a good summary of Small Group Ministry: Gathering....kinship....being heard.....celebrating matters large and small.....knowing each other.....healing.....giving again. Take time to reread the words of hymn # 360."

And from this "gathering," we move to our last hymn, "Wake, Now, My Senses." This hymn talks about a calling for each of us, and a ministry that we all have and share.

HYMN *SLT* #298 "Wake Now My Senses"

CLOSING WORDS *SLT* #705 Hosea Ballou

If we agree in love, there is no disagreement that can do us any injury, but if we do not, no other agreement can do us any good. Let us endeavor to keep the unity of the spirit in the bonds of peace. Blessed be and Amen.

POSTLUDE